

priated but expanded by adding two new floors. Each of these factories employed about 200 people. A FAI group in the wood union opposed the drive to consolidate the entire industry into a single union-managed industrial operation. They advocated the creation of small, autonomous production centers. Their critics described this as a throwback to the pre-capitalist era of self-employed artisans. The FAI proposal was defeated.

The union also seized the furniture retail stores. The lumber operations in the Pyrenees mountains were taken over. The union managed the entire industry from extracting the raw material to sale of the finished product in showrooms.

The union believed that it should look after the overall well-being of its members. To this end, the union built a gym with an Olympic-size swimming pool at the Double X factory. In a mountain valley the union set up an agricultural operation to grow food for the families of union members.

“The concept that prevailed,” a wood union member recalled, “was that the working class should have good furniture at cheap prices.”<sup>6</sup>

With so many of the union militants away in the militia, there was a tendency for the wood union to appoint former owners or their sons as administrative heads of sections. There was some danger in having people in such positions who are in the habit of giving orders and having others obey them. At the same time, the union committees were now transformed into administrative councils for an organization running an industry. According to one union member, discontent developed because the members felt they weren't involved in decision-making whereas “the CNT tradition was to discuss and examine everything.” One problem, in his view, was the failure to produce a newsletter to keep members informed.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Fraser, op cit, 221.

<sup>7</sup> Fraser, op cit, p. 223.

# Workers Power and the Spanish Revolution

Tom Wetzell

November 2, 2018

transport unions. They mapped the various bus, motor freight, and commercial shipping services. They discovered that various poor rural areas had no public transport services. Meanwhile, there was multiple duplication of services along the coastal corridor. As a result, the CNT transport unions agreed on a plan to eliminate some services competing with the railway such as the coastal maritime shipping line, and create new bus and motor freight services for unserved rural areas. The railway built a new branch line in a rural area of Aragon to serve both the villages and the nearby labor militia on the Aragon front.<sup>4</sup>

More than a dozen electric power, gas and water companies were expropriated by the CNT and UGT public utility unions. Initially the unions set up “control committees” after July 19<sup>th</sup> at the various companies, with the existing management still in place. The expropriation by the unions didn’t happen until the end of August. As with the railway industry, an industrial federation separate from the unions was formed to take over management of this industry. The UGT and CNT public utility industrial unions were about an equal proportion of the workforce — each about 8,000 members in Catalonia. Administrative councils for the gas, water and electric power divisions, each made up of an equal number of CNT and UGT delegates, were responsible to periodic regional assemblies of the workers.<sup>5</sup>

There were also numerous industries where the CNT union itself became the industrial federation, the organ of workers’ self-management of the industry.

The CNT wood union in Catalonia seized and shut down the small cabinet-making shops, where conditions were often cramped, inefficient and dangerous. These shops were replaced by a new factory, the Double X. The union imported French machinery with the latest safety devices. An existing large furniture factory was expro-

---

<sup>4</sup> Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, pp. 253–264.

<sup>5</sup> Gaston Leval, *ibid*, pp. 240–245.

two types. In some cases, the CNT union itself became the industrial federation running an industry. In other cases, the industrial federation was a new structure, apart from the union. This second type of industrial federation tended to emerge where there was a strong UGT union. The industrial federation was formally separate from the unions so that it could be an organization in which the CNT and UGT shared power.

The Madrid-Zaragoza-Alicante (MZA) was a large, privately owned railway that operated the mainlines from Madrid to Barcelona and Valencia, and the mainline along the Mediterranean coast. On July 20<sup>th</sup>, with street-fighting still going on in Barcelona, militants from the CNT railway national industrial union told the management of the MZA they were fired. The workers were taking over. The electric commuter railway operating out of Barcelona was also seized, and the railways were merged together into a single network. This takeover was initiated by the CNT union but the UGT soon came along. Each union had about an equal proportion of the railway workforce. The train operating crews, who had a more militant tradition, tended to belong to the CNT. The station agents, railway clerks, and yardmasters tended to belong to the UGT.

The new organization formed to operate the railway network was called the Revolutionary Railway Federation. The coordinating committee – called the Revolutionary Committee – consisted of six UGT members and six CNT members. Except for a full-time executive director, they all continued to work at their regular job. For each section of the railway line and each station, a committee was formed of *delegados* elected by a local assembly. In the bi-weekly assemblies, the proposals of the committee would be either approved or disapproved by the workers.

The railways had been operating at a loss even before the civil war, due to growing automobile use. To improve efficiency of the transport network, the railway federation undertook to do an extensive survey of transport services with the assistance of the CNT

## Contents

<b>Preface by Black Rose Anarchist Federation</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Boom and the Death Squads</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Mass Rent Strike</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The Land and the Church</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Uprisings and Factional Struggles</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Left-Libertarian Vision</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Coup</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>The Debate in the CNT Over Political Power</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>CNT Proposes Labor Government</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Unions Move Towards Socialization from Below</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Mujeres Libres</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Trajectory of the Spanish Communist Party</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>“The Spanish Kronstadt”</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Forced Collectivization?</b>	<b>77</b>

of the industries but are “only administrators at the service of the entire society.” Economic councils, Abad de Santillan wrote, would “receive their directives from below, they make adjustments according to regional and national congresses.”

According to Joan Ferrer, a bookkeeper who was the secretary of the CNT commercial workers union in Barcelona:

“It was our idea in the CNT that everything should start from the worker, not — as with the Communists — that everything should be run by the state. To this end we wanted to set up industrial federations — textiles, metal-working, department stores, etc. — which would be represented on an overall Economics Council which would direct the economy. Everything, including economic planning, would thus remain in the hands of the workers.”<sup>3</sup>

In the variation on this theme approved by the Zaragoza congress, there would also be input to the social planning process about what to produce from the geographic resident assemblies in the neighborhoods or villages and the regional and national People’s Congresses linking these resident assemblies together.

In the libertarian syndicalist view, socialization of the economy was to be constructed “from below,” through the direct activity of the workers themselves. There were two aspects or phases to syndicalist socialization. The first phase was expropriation of assets of the capitalists and creation of an industrial federation, suppressing market competition between firms in the industry. The second phase would be the creation of overall social planning. In fact, Spain never got to this second phase.

In a number of industries, the unions moved quickly to create an industrial federation, merging the assets of the businesses in that industry. Where industrial federations were set up, these were of

---

<sup>3</sup> Interview in the early ‘70s, Fraser, op cit, p. 220.

Spanish National Telephone Co, the largest subsidiary of the American multinational ITT. In Valencia, the CNT created an organization to manage the purchase, packing and export of the citrus crop — Spain’s largest source of foreign exchange earnings in the 1930s.

Thousands of houses of the wealthy were expropriated as were large apartment complexes. There were also at least a couple thousand collectivized agricultural communities created throughout the anti-fascist zone.

Before discussing the details of workers’ self-management created by the unions, it is useful to keep in mind what the CNT’s aim was. Before the civil war, the CNT had never advocated that workplaces or industries should become the collective private property of their workers. Abad Diego de Santillan explained the rationale for the CNT’s opposition to private ownership:

“We are an anti-capitalist, anti-proprietor movement. We have seen in the private ownership of the instruments of labor, of factories, of the means of transport, in the capitalist apparatus of distribution, the primary cause of misery and injustice. We wanted the socialization of all the wealth in order that not a single individual should be left on the margin of the banquet of life.”<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the CNT advocated social ownership. All of the workplaces in an industry would be grouped together into an industrial federation which would be responsible for managing that industry. The industrial federations would be coordinated by regional and national economics councils. Social ownership would be reflected in the development of social plans to which the various industrial federations would be expected to adhere in their work. The industrial federations, wrote de Santillan are not “proprietors”

---

<sup>2</sup> Diego Abad de Santillan, statement from December, 1936, appended to the 1937 addition of *After the Revolution*, p. 121.

## Preface by Black Rose Anarchist Federation

In a political moment where the tide of fascism appears to be on the march, looking at past examples can provide inspiration, hope and lessons. In this valuable and lucid long-form essay, veteran writer and activist Tom Wetzel details what George Orwell described when first arriving in anarchist dominated Barcelona as his first time actually seeing “the working class was in the saddle.”

Most critically the essay focuses on the question of working class power and revolutionary vision within the events and specifically from within the anarchist movement in Spain. Often overlooked in many accounts is that the military coup of July 1936 was anticipated by the organized left in Spain. In May of 1936 the CNT held what was known as the Zaragoza congress which debated and adopted a revolutionary vision of “libertarian communism” that would be built from “a dual structure of governance ... based on both workplace assemblies and assemblies of residents in villages or neighborhoods” which would federate on the national level. Also discussed are the critical internal debates and opposition within the CNT to joining the popular front government, the alternative proposals to replace the government with organs of working class power, and the betrayal of the revolution’s ideals by the Soviet-aligned Communist Party.

## Introduction

In Spain's national elections in February of 1936, a repressive right-wing government was swept out of office and replaced by a coalition of liberals and socialists. Taking advantage of a less repressive environment, Spain's workers propelled the largest strike wave in Spanish history, with dozens of citywide general strikes and hundreds of partial strikes. By the end of June a million workers were out on strike.

Barely a month after the election, the Land Workers Federation led 80,000 landless laborers into a seizure of three thousand farms in the "Spanish Siberia" — the poverty-stricken region of Estremadura.<sup>1</sup> With the country at a high pitch of debate over its future, political polarization was punctuated by tit-for-tat killings of Right and Left activists. With right-wing politicians openly calling for an army takeover, the widely anticipated army *coup* began in Spain on July 19<sup>th</sup>. For the first time in Spanish history, the people aggressively resisted an army takeover attempt. The *coup* was defeated in two-thirds of the country. The unions moved to confiscate vast amounts of capitalist assets, putting most of Spain's economy under worker management. Unions built their own revolutionary labor army to fight the Spanish military. The military's attempt to crush the country's labor movement propelled the working class revolution that the Spanish elite had long feared. The civil war itself was class struggle in its most extreme form.

---

<sup>1</sup> Abel Paz, *Durruti: The People Armed*, p. 181.

## Unions Move Towards Socialization from Below

There is no clearer expression of the revolutionary spirit of the CNT than the massive expropriation of capitalist industry in Spain that took place during the summer of 1936, and the direct management of industry by the workers during the civil war. In the Barcelona area alone, more than 3,000 enterprises were seized by the unions. No instructions for these takeovers were issued by the regional or national committees of the CNT. They were carried out on the initiative of the activists in the local unions. Expropriation was especially widespread in Catalonia with the CNT holding de facto armed power.

Burnett Bolloten was an American UPI reporter in Spain at the time. Among the industries that Bolloten lists as "confiscated by the unions and controlled by worker committees" were the following: railways, commercial shipping, streetcars and buses, taxicabs, electric power companies, gas and water systems, glass-bottle factories and perfumeries, textile mills and paper factories, mines and cement works, food processing plants and breweries, motion picture theaters, live theaters and grand opera, newspapers and print shops, department stores and hotels, deluxe restaurants and bars.<sup>1</sup> In addition, motor freight companies, bakeries, barber shops, the plate glass and mirror industry, the lumber industry in the Pyrenees mountains, furniture-making, and hospitals were also expropriated. The CNT national telephone industrial union seized the

---

<sup>1</sup> Burnett Bolloten, *The Grand Camouflage: The Communist Conspiracy in the Spanish Civil War*, pp. 43–44.

the objections of the middle class Republicans, Basque Nationalists, and their social-democratic and Communist allies.

Throughout the month of October, *Solidaridad Obrera*, the CNT's daily paper in Barcelona, had mounted a major campaign in favor of the proposal for a joint CNT-UGT National Defense Council. Now that the CNT had opted for Popular Front collaboration, the CNT regional committee wanted a less "intransigently revolutionary" line at *Solidaridad Obrera*. Among the staff members who were fired due to their opposition to the policy of Popular Front collaboration was a disabled journalist, Jaime Balius<sup>8</sup> and the paper's managing editor, Liberto Callejas. Balius and Callejas would later surface in an attempt to revive the labor defense council proposal in the spring of 1937.

Two of the key players in this drama were the country's main labor federations. The National Confederation of Labor (*Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* — CNT) had 1.6 million members in early 1936 (according to government statistics). The CNT was the result of nearly seven decades of anarchist labor organizing in Spain. Since 1919 the CNT had been based on the *sindicato unico* ("single union") — autonomous local industrial unions. In Barcelona in 1936 the CNT construction and metallurgical *sindicatos unicos* each had more than 30,000 members.

Each *sindicato unico* had "sections" that had their own assemblies and elected shop stewards (*delegados*). In manufacturing industries like textile or metalworking, there was a "section" for each firm or plant. In the construction industry, the "sections" corresponded to the various crafts. All of the autonomous industrial unions in a city or county (*comarca*) were grouped together into a local labor council (*federación local*).

The unions were part of a larger context of movement institutions. The libertarian Left in Spain also organized alternative schools and an extensive network of *ateneos* — storefront community centers. The *ateneos* were centers for debates, cultural events, literacy classes (between 30 and 50 percent of the population was illiterate in the '30s), and so on. A characteristic idea of Spanish anarchism was the empowerment of ordinary people, preparing them for effective participation in the struggle for social transformation.

The libertarian syndicalism of the CNT was a form of "prefigurative" politics. In developing a union based on participation in decision-making through the assemblies and unpaid, elected *delegados*, CNT militants believed they were practicing a form of organization that was a foretaste of a society where workers ran industry and the society was self-managed through the participatory democracy of assemblies.

The region of Spain along the Mediterranean coast from Murcia north to Catalonia and Aragon corresponds roughly to the territory

---

<sup>8</sup> Agustín Guillamón, *The Friends of Durruti Group: 1937–1939*, p. 24.

of the medieval Kingdom of Aragon-Catalonia, which was merged with Castille in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to form the modern Spanish nation-state. This region was the main stronghold of the CNT in the 1930s. In Aragon and Murcia 80 percent of union members belonged to the CNT; in Valencia it was 70 percent. In industrial Catalonia 60 percent of the union members were in the CNT. “Union density” in Catalonia in 1936 was quite high — 60 percent of the region’s 900,000 wage-earners belonged to a union.

The second major labor organization in Spain was the General Union of Workers (*Union General de Trabajadores* — UGT), with 1.4 million members in early 1936. The UGT was aligned with the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español* — PSOE) although the Communist Party was also active within it. The UGT was the majority union organization in the Castillian central regions of Spain, including Madrid, and in the coal-mining region of Asturias on the north Atlantic coast. The UGT Land Workers Federation (*Federación Nacional de Trabajadores de la Tierra* — FNTT) had a half million members in the spring of 1936. With its campaign for agrarian reform through land seizures, the FNTT was a mass revolutionary movement in the countryside.

ticipate in the farce of [parliamentary] elections.” This is not the same as saying that a polity — a structure of popular governance — is not needed to replace the state. Just as syndicalists had always emphasized the continuity of social production being maintained in a process of social transformation, the same argument can be made for the political functions — making and enforcing the basic rules in society. These are also necessary functions.

To respond to Socialist concerns about ensuring the loyalty of the “anti-fascist petty bourgeoisie,” the CNT, at another national plenary in mid-September, modified the National Defense Council proposal so that it would be made up of five CNT delegates, five UGT delegates, and four representatives of the Republican Parties. With this modification, one of the smaller Republican parties — the Federal Republicans — endorsed the CNT proposal. But Largo Caballero still refused this “leap outside the bounds of the Constitution.” With the CNT joining the *Generalitat* government, he knew the CNT wasn’t serious. Caballero made a counter proposal: The CNT would join the existing Popular Front government.

Finally, at yet another national plenary on September 28<sup>th</sup>, the *treintista* national secretary of the CNT, Horacio Prieto, pushed for accepting Caballero’s offer. The delegation from Catalonia was adamantly opposed to this. The regional organization in Catalonia was inconsistent — it opposed the CNT doing at the national level what it had done in Catalonia.

Having failed to chart a coherent course for unifying the working class in building new structures of governance, to replace the Republican state, the CNT finally joined the national Popular Front government on November 4<sup>th</sup>, receiving only four out of 18 posts in the cabinet.<sup>7</sup> At the first meeting of the new government, Joan Peiró proposed that the government authorize the complete collectivization of the Spanish economy. This initiative was blocked by

---

<sup>7</sup> José Peirats, op cit, pp. 185–186.



26<sup>th</sup>. This completely undermined the CNT's bargaining leverage with Caballero because it told him they weren't serious about their Defense Council proposal.

While the negotiations with the UGT for a National Defense Council were going on in Madrid, Eduardo de Guzmán was editor of the CNT paper *Castilla Libre* in Madrid. In his view, the initiative to form a working-class government in Madrid was hindered by the CNT's failure to take power in Barcelona. Even if the complete implementation of "libertarian communism" was not possible at the moment, it was possible to create

"a proletarian government — total working-class democracy in which all sectors of the proletariat — but of the proletariat alone — would be represented...To make a revolution, power must be seized. If the CNT had done so in Catalonia, it would have helped, not hindered, our minority position in Madrid. But they believed that it was sufficient to have taken the streets, to have seized arms. They completely overlooked the importance of the state apparatus."

According to de Guzmán, "the petty bourgeoisie was inevitably opposed to the proletariat. The Communists were recruiting in this class, and in alliance with the petty bourgeois Republicans were bound to gain strength if the *Generalitat* and the central government were reconstituted." He believed that it was a mistake for the CNT to have not pushed for a working class government at the very beginning when there was no effective government in Madrid at all. "A revolutionary moment of great promise had been lost," in his opinion.<sup>6</sup>

De Guzmán suggests that there was a confusion about "apoliticism" in the CNT. In his view it should mean "simply not to par-

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Eduardo de Guzmán, early 1970s, in Fraser, op cit, p. 186 and pp. 335–336.

## The Boom and the Death Squads

The mass mobilizations and the social polarization leading up to the civil war were the culmination of a social crisis that had been brewing in Spain for decades. The crisis began to manifest itself during the World War I era. Spain was neutral during the war and was able to trade with both sides. A massive industrialization and urbanization boom got underway in Catalonia. This would continue during the world boom of the 1920s. Barcelona was the fastest growing city in western Europe in this period. Industrial suburbs grew up rapidly around new factories. Barcelona had been a major trading center on the Mediterranean since the middle ages, and was home to an entrepreneurial business class.

The economic boom of the World War I years also led to growth for Spain's two major labor organizations. The Russian revolution of February 1917 also encouraged a growing radical trend. The high point of labor struggle during the war was a national general strike in 1917, supported by both the UGT and CNT. In Barcelona the CNT were masters of the city until the army moved in to suppress the strike. (Victor Serge's novel *Birth of Our Power* is an impressionistic account of the 1917 Barcelona general strike.)

To deal with the growing threat of the CNT in Catalonia, the head of the police, Severiano Martínez Anido, began recruiting gunmen to assassinate CNT officials and activists, with the assistance of the police. Employers and officials of the Roman Catholic Church provided funding for the death squads. During this period

there were 440 attempted murders of workers in Catalonia.<sup>1</sup> Workers were being forced to join “yellow” trade unions, the *Sindicatos Libres* (“Free Unions”), at the point of a gun. A small core of religious, Carlist skilled workers had formed the *Sindicatos Libres*. Carlism was a form of right-wing Catholic politics in Spain. In response, some young anarchists formed armed action groups, which retaliated by assassinating employers and church leaders who were believed to be funding the death squads.

For years Spain had been trying to hold onto its last scrap of empire in Morocco. In 1923 a military campaign in Morocco, promoted by King Alfonso, led to a disaster in which 10,000 Spanish soldiers were killed. The army clamped a dictatorship on Spain, headed by General Miguel Primo de Rivera, partly as a means to suppress outrage over this incident. The CNT was banned throughout the country. Primo de Rivera introduced a scheme of incorporating the unions into the state via Arbitration Boards; he encouraged participation by the UGT as a “responsible” alternative to the CNT. The Catholic “Free Unions,” preaching the harmony of labor and capital and a form of proletarian clerical-fascism, competed with the UGT for representation on the Arbitration Boards. With state and employer backing, the Free Unions had formed a national organization by 1925 (*Federación Nacional de Sindicatos Libres* — FNSL) with 200,000 members,<sup>2</sup> nearly as large as the UGT.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alberto Balcels, *Cataluña contemporánea II (1900–1936)*, p. 17, cited in Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*.

<sup>2</sup> Colin M. Winston, *Workers and the Right in Spain, 1900–1936*.

commissions.” Organized labor would have a monopoly of armed power in Spain.

The CNT’s timing was off, however. For the first six weeks after the military *coup*, ineffective liberals presided over the government in Madrid. By early September, however, Largo Caballero, executive secretary of the UGT, had just been made prime minister. He had said publicly that the revolution had to be put on hold to defeat the fascist army. Marcel Rosenberg, the Soviet ambassador, warned Caballero that the CNT proposal would destroy the “international legitimacy” of the Spanish Republic. Manuel Azaña, President of the Republic, threatened to resign. To placate the Communists, CNT representatives met with the Central Committee of the PCE and assured them that they would still be represented via their trade union cadres in the UGT.

Largo Caballero and the Left Socialists had a history of wavering. They would talk about “proletarian revolution” one moment, then scurry back to a moderate social-democratic stance the next moment. To give Caballero some spine, they needed to put him over a barrel. In Catalonia they had the power to simply wipe away the *Generalitat* government and implement their proposal for a joint governing council with the other unions. Doing that could have forced the UGT to agree to extend this solution to all of Spain.

Regional defense councils were created in Asturias and Aragon. The Council of Asturias had 15 members, with the UGT in the majority. The middle-class Republicans were only given two representatives. In Aragon the initiative to form a CNT-controlled Regional Defense Council came from the CNT village unions in the zone of Aragon that had been liberated by the labor militia.

But Catalonia was far more important than rural Aragon or Asturias. Catalonia had three-fourths of Spain’s industrial capacity and Spain’s largest city. If the *Generalitat* had been replaced with a working class governance structure, Caballero couldn’t have ignored this. But instead, the CNT of Catalonia went in the opposite direction. They joined the *Generalitat* government on September

At another regional plenary of the CNT in Catalonia in the last days of August, Garcia Oliver, frustrated with the ineffectiveness of the Anti-fascist Militia Committee, once again proposed that the CNT take power, abolishing the *Generalitat*, removing the political party leaders from any role, and reducing the role of the UGT to a minority, in keeping with its size in Catalonia.<sup>2</sup>

On August 31<sup>st</sup>, José Giral, the Republican prime minister in Madrid, told a member of the CNT national committee:

“Everything is in the hands of the CNT! The CNT directs the war as it wants but without sharing in the supreme responsibilities. Govern! Take power!”<sup>3</sup>

Finally, at a national plenary of the CNT on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, at the insistence of the regional delegation from Catalonia, the CNT decided to propose the formation of a revolutionary labor government to replace the national Popular Front government: a National Defense Council (*Junta Nacional de Defensa*) made up of seven delegates of the UGT and seven of the CNT, with Largo Caballero as president.<sup>4</sup> The national council would be part of a federalist system with regional Councils of Defense. The authority of the councils would be limited to the social self-defense function — “people’s courts,” police, a unified People’s Militia. The Defense Councils would have no authority to intervene in the management of industry; industries would be managed by the workers. A Russian agent in Spain wrote to the Soviet authorities: “The thought of creating such a council finds a wide response even among the masses that are not under the anarchists’ influence.”<sup>5</sup> The CNT proposed that the unified People’s Militia be controlled by “joint CNT-UGT

---

<sup>2</sup> Cesar M. Lorenzo, op cit, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Cesar M. Lorenzo, ibid, p. 180.

<sup>4</sup> Cesar M. Lorenzo, op cit, pp. 180–181.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov, eds., *Spain Betrayed: The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War*, p. 48.

## Mass Rent Strike

In 1930 the king fled the country as the dictatorship collapsed. Elections brought a coalition of liberals and socialists to power, to govern the new Republic. The CNT unions regained the legal right to organize.

Faced with growing unemployment, and a desire to rebuild their organization, the CNT *sindicato unico* of construction workers in Barcelona began a campaign of invading construction sites to sign up members and to demand that contractors hire 15 percent more workers. The construction union argued that the housing sector in Catalonia had made super-profits during the boom of the ‘20s — profits that were tied down in unproductive investments. Increasing the number of people employed by the industry would put more money into circulation, helping to counter the depression. With workers pouring into the CNT *sindicato unico*, the Catholic FNSL construction craft unions collapsed.

In the late ‘20s a broad debate had begun in the CNT about the union’s future direction. One aspect of this debate was the proposal to group local unions into national industry unions for coordinated action against employers in an industry throughout the country. Joan Peiró — a self-educated glass worker and an influential syndicalist theoretician — was able to persuade a CNT congress to allow national industry unions in 1931. However, some anarchists opposed this proposal on the grounds that it could lead to the development of a new bureaucracy of paid officials beyond the control of the local unions. Due to this opposition, national industrial unions were created in only a few industries in the CNT before 1936. A national industrial union was created among workers at the Spanish

National Telephone Co. In 1931 the CNT launched a nation-wide strike against the phone company. This was an initiation into union struggle for the largely female workforce of telephone operators.

Another aspect of the debate in the CNT was how to break out of the box of industrial struggles that focus only on issues of wages and working conditions. There was a feeling that the CNT needed to extend its influence beyond a purely labor context to other areas of society. Joan Peiró argued for the formation of neighborhood-based committees to organize around broad issues of concern to the working class, not just work-related questions.

During the boom of the '20s, rents had risen by 150 percent in Barcelona. Crowding, construction of shanties by unscrupulous landlords and housing without basic amenities like running water had become common. In early 1931 activists in the CNT began to discuss the possibility of a struggle around rents, and articles about the housing crisis began appearing in the big daily paper operated by the CNT in Barcelona, *Solidaridad Obrera*.

The rent struggle began with a mass meeting of the CNT construction union in April of 1931. At that meeting Arturo Parera and Santiago Bilbao proposed the formation of an Economic Defense Commission, with the participation of other unions. Parera and Bilbao were both prominent members of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (*Federación Anarquista Iberica* — FAI). The FAI was a loose amalgam of anarchist groups that worked mainly as caucuses within the CNT unions.

After a series of neighborhood meetings, the rent campaign settled on a demand for a 40 percent rent rollback at a mass meeting at the Palace of Fine Arts on July 5<sup>th</sup>. The meeting decided that the rent deposits paid by tenants should be used to pay the next month's rent and after that renters would refuse to pay rent if their landlord didn't agree to the rent reduction. The Chamber of Urban Property — the landlords' organization — denounced the campaign as a criminal violation of their rights. They demanded police action to suppress the rent campaign. By the end of August, the Economic

## CNT Proposes Labor Government

The leading CNT activists and militia leaders saw that there was clearly a need for a unified command and unified training and supply systems. If they couldn't do this for the militia, there would inevitably be pressure to re-create a conventional army run by the Republican state. Within days of the military *coup*, the Communist Party started beating the drum for the re-creation of a conventional, top-down military.

The revolutionary militia system could only be saved if the CNT could find a way to create a unified militia. The only way to do this would be to create a unified labor governance structure for Spain. The unions needed to take power.

To counter the drive to rebuild the old hierarchical army, Garcia Oliver gave a speech on August 10<sup>th</sup>, calling for a revolutionary people's army:

“A people's army growing out of the militia should be organized on new principles. We will organize a revolutionary military school where we will train technical officers who will not be carbon copies of the old officers, but rather simply technicians who will follow the instructions of officers who have proven their loyalty to the people and the proletariat.”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> José Peirats, *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, p. 161. (This is a translation of *Los anarquistas en la crisis española*.)

(PCE) in Catalonia. The PSUC had two seats on the Anti-fascist Militia Committee, even though the larger POUM had only one.<sup>6</sup>

The 70,000-member FOUS had no representatives. In August the CNT regional leaders in Catalonia would enter into a deal with the UGT to allow only UGT and CNT union cards for participation in the food rationing systems set up in the wake of the fascist *coup*. This forced the dissolution of the FOUS. This was a sectarian error on the part of the leading anarcho-syndicalists. The POUM's politics were closer to those of the CNT than the Moscow-line Communists. The Communists would soon cement their control over the UGT in Catalonia. Leaving the FOUS intact would have provided the CNT with an important ally.

The Anti-fascist Militia Committee proved to be ineffective. There was no unified policy or real coordination. Each organization used its posts as it wanted. The *Esquerra*, PSUC and POUM each had their own separate militia divisions, apart from the much larger union militia of the CNT. Each of these four organizations ran its own militia command and provided its own supply system for its militia. This was the pattern throughout Spain. This was not an effective way to run the armed struggle against the fascist army. There was a general failure at coordination.

---

<sup>6</sup> On the composition of the Anti-fascist Militia Committee, Cesar M. Lorenzo, *op cit*, p. 86.

Defense Commission claimed that 100,000 people were not paying their rent.

The ability of the rent struggle to reach out beyond the existing CNT union members was illustrated by the large numbers of women who were active in the struggle. On one occasion a group of *asaltos* (Assault Guards — a paramilitary national police force created by Republican politicians in the early '30s) sent to evict a tenant backed down when confronted by a large crowd of women and children. Because the city employees charged with carrying out evictions were either intimidated by the crowds or were sympathetic to the rent strike, the landlords began recruiting their own militia to carry out evictions.

The landlords' organization appealed to the national government to take action to suppress the strike. Largo Caballero, the UGT executive secretary and a leader of the PSOE, was a member of the cabinet in the liberal/socialist coalition government. Caballero was unsympathetic to the rent strike, calling it "absurd." At the same time, Caballero's UGT was providing scabs to break the CNT telephone strike in Madrid.

In the midst of the rent strike in Barcelona, a large explosion went off. No one was injured, but there was severe damage to telephone equipment. Even though there was no connection to the rent strike, the government used this as a pretext to ban meetings of the Economic Defense Commission. The government also banned meetings of the CNT telephone union.

The national government appointed a conservative lawyer as civil governor for Catalonia and he announced that he would simply not allow the rent strike to continue. The authorities began using preventive detention to hold Santiago Bilbao and 52 other CNT activists. Preventive detention meant that a person could be held indefinitely without any charges being filed. This had been one of the hated methods of the military dictatorship. People had thought that these methods would become a thing of the past under the new Republic.

Eventually, police were able to suppress the rent strike by arresting tenants who had been put back into apartments by their neighbors after an eviction. Nonetheless, in many areas of the city individual landlords had entered into rent reduction deals with their tenants. Many tenants thus felt they had won something. For a younger generation of CNT activists, this was the first time they had been involved in a large-scale direct action campaign. For working class participants it was a direct lesson in the way a broad range of groups, from landlords to police to politicians, were aligned against them.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Information on the Barcelona rent strike of 1931 is from Nick Rider, “The Practice of Direct Action: The Barcelona Rent Strike of 1931” in *For Anarchism: History, Theory, and Practice*, David Goodway, ed.

paratus that would be used to defend the interests of classes that dominate the working class.

Although the Republican state apparatus was temporarily disarmed, due to the revolt of the old army and police, and the construction of a revolutionary labor militia, the state apparatus still had considerable resources as long as it was left intact. It had social legitimacy in the eyes of the Republican middle classes, and it had control over the country’s financial system, gold reserves and foreign currency and trade relationships. Almost immediately after the *coup* the Communist Party began its campaign to rebuild the Republican state.

This means that the real question the CNT faced was how to create a joint governing structure for the country with the other unions, wiping away the old state apparatus and institutionalizing working class power.

The CNT actually did come around to this conclusion. But it would take another six weeks of debate in the union.

The Anti-fascist Militia Committee was not an organ of working class “dual power.” The Popular Front leaders in fact controlled the committee, just like the government. The 350,000-member CNT held only three out of 15 seats on the committee, with another two representatives for the FAI. The UGT, which had only 100,000 members in Catalonia, also had three seats. The *Esquerra*’s farmers’ union had one seat. The middle-class Republican political parties had four representatives.

Within days of the military *coup*, a new political organization was formed in Catalonia – the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (*Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* – PSUC). This was formed from the merger of four small parties: the section of the PSOE in Catalonia, the Catalan Communist Party (PCC), the Proletarian Party (a Catalan nationalist worker group), and the Socialist Union (a social democratic group). The PSUC, with 6,000 members, became the affiliate of the Moscow-line Spanish Communist Party

insist that its aim was “the triumph of the proletarian revolution.” Victory in this endeavor would require that the working class dissolve the institutional basis of the power of classes that dominate and exploit the working class.

The social base of the Republican political parties in Spain was the small business and professional/managerial classes. These social classes would inevitably oppose the proletarian revolution, as it would dissolve their class privilege and power. Any power retained by the Republican and Basque Nationalist party leaders in governance would be used to obstruct the process of working class empowerment. Moreover, the Communist Party, since the adoption of its “Popular Front” orientation, and the social-democratic wing of the PSOE, were allied with these anti-fascist middle strata.

On the other hand, it was equally clear that a working class victory would require the maximum of working class unity. The CNT could not ignore the 1.4 million workers in the UGT. And in Catalonia, there were also the 70,000 workers in the POUM-controlled FOUS unions. In a life or death struggle against the army, the masses of CNT members would insist that the CNT work out an alliance with the other working class organizations. The CNT had already committed itself to a “revolutionary workers’ alliance” with the UGT at its congress in May. The CNT-UGT unity in the uprising in Asturias in October 1934 was an example that everyone was familiar with.

If the CNT could not come up with a practical program for a unified working class political power, this would mean that the only alternative would be the strategy being promoted by the Communists and the other Popular Front parties: a top-down unity of leaders of the Popular Front parties through a rebuilt Republican state. No other option was realistic. Either the CNT took political power jointly with the other unions, or the need for unity in the struggle against the fascist army would lead to the Popular Front solution. In that case, the Spanish state would be rebuilt — a hierarchical ap-

## The Land and the Church

Spain in the ‘30s was a country with very uneven economic development. Wealthy, industrialized Catalonia might look like developed areas in other western European countries, but other areas of Spain were rather different. Spain was still a predominantly agrarian country, with 45.5 percent of the “economically active” population engaged in agriculture. In an agrarian country a large part of the wealth is tied up in land ownership. South of the Guadarrama mountains was the *latifundia* zone, the region that had been conquered from the Moors by a Castilian army in the middle ages. Capitalist investors bought up *latifundias* — huge estates — after feudal restrictions on sale of land were broken in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this region two thousand families owned 90 percent of the land. Meanwhile, 750,000 landless laborers were employed at starvation wages.

North of the Guadarramas were areas where *campesinos* owned small- to medium-sized farms. In some areas of the north, the plots were often too small to support a family. The *campesinos* had to hire themselves out for wages, or work as sharecroppers.

The main social base of the far-right political parties were the religious, land-owning farmers in areas of the north like Old Castile and Navarre, and the religious middle strata — small business owners, lawyers, officials, etc. — of the provincial towns. In the big cities and along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts these middle classes were the social base of the liberal Republican parties.

The elite classes in Spain regarded the Spanish Roman Catholic Church as an essential ideological prop of the social order. But the church was widely hated in working class circles for preaching the

acceptance of poverty while amassing vast assets and catering to the more affluent sectors of society. In 1930 there were more clergy in Spain than in any country other than Italy. There were 35,000 priests and 80,000 monks and nuns. Yet regular attendance at mass was not very high. South of the Guadarramas, it was as low as 5 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> Church opposition to science meant that many teachers and doctors were anti-clerical. Anti-clericalism was widespread among the Spanish Left, from working class anarchists to middle-class liberal Republicans.

The first liberal/socialist Republican government in 1931 attacked the power of the church by disallowing any church role in education other than religious instruction. The powerful Jesuit order was dissolved. Civil marriage and divorce were established.

---

<sup>1</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War*, p. 29.

in the unions or discuss the implications of what was being decided. Garcia Oliver believed that the meeting had been unduly influenced by “petty bourgeois anarchist intellectuals” like Montseny and Abad de Santillan, who had a certain influence through the anarchist press in Catalonia.

But why were the labor council delegates swayed by the remarks of Montseny and de Santillan? Conceiving of union political power as a “CNT dictatorship” may be the result of an ambiguity in the syndicalist concept of “prefigurative” politics. The idea that the libertarian unions “prefigure” a society of self-management could be interpreted to mean that the union itself takes over economic and political management of the society — and syndicalists have sometimes talked in that way. This might lead to the conclusion that the CNT itself would be the governing structure for the economy and polity. Hence a “CNT dictatorship.”

But the syndicalist concept of prefigurative politics, of “building the new society in the shell of the old,” doesn’t have to be interpreted that way. It could be understood to mean that practices and habits of participatory democracy are built up through the mass union organizations and then this is reflected in *new* structures of worker management of the economy and structures of political governance, separate from the union itself. The Zaragoza vision document included a proposal for regional and national worker congresses, as part of the economic planning process. These congresses would be made up of delegates elected by the union or workplace assemblies. A regional worker congress could have been a means to unite the CNT, UGT and FOUS unions in Catalonia. The 350,000-member CNT was the majority labor organization in Catalonia. It would have a great influence over the direction taken by a structure of political power in which the FOUS and UGT unions also participated, as minorities.

Montseny’s talk of “CNT dictatorship” was tailored to appeal to anarchist prejudices. But this did not properly frame the situation facing the CNT at this time. In the coming months, the CNT would



de Santillan were both members of *Nervio* — a FAI group. Both worked for the anarchist publishing cooperative that had been founded by Montseny's parents. Montseny was a member of the Peninsular Committee of the FAI and both her and de Santillan were at this meeting as representatives of the FAI.

Montseny argued that Garcia Oliver's proposal to carry out the CNT's "libertarian communist" program would mean the imposition of an "anarchist dictatorship" over the population. Abad de Santillan focused on the danger of foreign intervention, pointing to the presence off the coast of British warships.

In reply, Garcia Oliver pointed out that he had never spoken of a "dictatorship" of anarchists or of the CNT. He objected to calling the rule of the workers' unions a "dictatorship." He argued that, as the majority labor organization, the CNT had an obligation to lead the way forward in the revolution and he believed that the libertarian, democratic practices and ideology of the CNT unions would be a guarantee that union governance of the society would not degenerate into an authoritarian regime. He tagged Abad de Santillan's comments as just an appeal to fear. In response to Vazquez, he said that at least the regional secretary acknowledged that a revolution must be governed. But he insisted that the CNT must be in charge of making the revolution.

While Garcia Oliver was speaking, he noticed that Fidel Miró —another member of the *Nervio* group and an activist in the Libertarian Youth — was moving from delegation to delegation in the hall, lining up votes. When the vote was taken, the proposal for collaboration with the Popular Front parties on the Anti-fascist Militia Committee got the majority.<sup>5</sup>

In his memoir, Garcia Oliver points out that the delegates had been gathered in haste, without the opportunity to consult activists

---

<sup>5</sup> This account of the debate is from Juan Garcia Oliver, "Wrong Steps: Errors in the Spanish Revolution," Mick Parker, translator. (This pamphlet is an English translation of excerpts from Garcia Oliver's memoir, *Eco de los pasos*.)

## Uprisings and Factional Struggles

The liberal/socialist coalition also engaged in various acts of repression directed against CNT unions. Caballero was willing to take advantage of these measures to build the UGT union at the expense of the CNT. In this repressive environment, which forced the CNT into direct confrontations with the authorities, a number of anarchist groups in the CNT pushed the union into attempted revolutionary general strikes and insurrectionary adventures. In a typical scenario, a group of anarchists would seize the local town hall, run up the red and black flag, burn property records and declare "libertarian communism" in the town. Advocates of these methods called this "revolutionary gymnastics." These attempted insurrections were a throwback to the 19<sup>th</sup> century anarchist concept of "propaganda by the deed" — the idea that an exemplary action by a small group of revolutionaries can spark off a spontaneous popular uprising. In the most infamous of these attempts — a failed national general strike in January 1933 — paramilitary *asaltos* carried out a massacre in the village of Casas Viejas in Andalusia. A whole family was burned in their hut and the police shot people who had surrendered.

The worst fears of many syndicalists were realized in the January 1933 uprising: "the national confederation and the regionals [were] manipulated by a small group of militants who had committed the entire membership to precipitous and dangerous action," writes Jerome Mintz. "The membership had been badly mauled in

street fighting, the leaders arrested and beaten, and the [unions] closed.”<sup>1</sup>

In the syndicalist view, social transformation required the prior organization and education of the working class, the development of its skills and self-confidence, and working out a coherent revolutionary strategy, not a reliance on pure “spontaneity.” Joan Peiró, in his 1933 book *Sindicalismo*, put it this way:

“For us the social revolution is not just a matter of rising violently against the organized forces of the state...The social revolution consists in taking over factories and mines, the land and the railways. It is not sufficient to take over social wealth, it is necessary to know how to use it — and to use it immediately, without any discontinuity.”<sup>2</sup>

“Continuity” would be assured by the fact that the social transformation is carried out by the workers themselves, who have the skills to continue the running of industry.

The factional struggle inside the CNT in the early ‘30s became quite heated after a group of thirty union officials and activists sent to the capitalist press a document criticizing an alleged “dictatorship” over the CNT by the FAI. These thirty activists and their followers became known as the *treintista* (“thirty-ist”) tendency. It wasn’t only the *treintistas* who opposed the insurrectionary adventures being propelled by FAI groups in Catalonia. FAI groups outside Catalonia were also critical. With the advent of the Republic, one of the leading *treintistas* — Angel Pestaña — began advocating the formation of a labor political party, and soon established the Unionist Party (*Partido Sindicalista*) to compete in parliamentary elections. Although most *treintistas* did not follow Pestaña into

---

<sup>1</sup> Jerome Mintz, *The Anarchists of Casas Viejas*, p. 268.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War*, p. 544.

torship imposed by a minority. After a heated debate, the Barcelona labor council voted against the option of taking power.<sup>4</sup>

However, this didn’t settle the question. The actual decision would be made by a regional plenary of all the CNT local labor councils in Catalonia. The regional secretary called this meeting for July 23<sup>rd</sup>. The regional plenary was a meeting of over 500 CNT local labor council delegates. The meeting was held in the Casa de Cambó, the former employers’ association headquarters. This large building had just been seized as a revolutionary act, to provide space for the CNT, FAI and *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women — the anarchist women’s organization).

The delegation from the labor council of Bajo Llobregat proposed that the unions should take power and overthrow the *Generlitat*; now was the moment to carry out the CNT’s revolutionary program, in their view. Bajo Llobregat was an area of industrial suburbs on the south edge of Barcelona, an area that had been built up during the industrial boom of the 1920s. The Bajo Llobregat delegation asked Garcia Oliver to articulate their position in the debate. A charismatic speaker, Garcia Oliver had worked most of his life as a waiter, when he wasn’t in jail. His life-long experience of class struggle left him with a strong sense that the working class would have to impose its will on society if it was ever to free itself. Garcia Oliver emphasized that a revolutionary process must be governed, it cannot be left with a power vacuum, which “would allow the various Marxist tendencies to take control and obliterate us.” The regional secretary, Mariano Vazquez — a construction worker of gypsy origin — maintained that they should accept Companys’ offer of participation in an Anti-fascist Militia Committee provisionally while “governing from the streets.”

The main speakers against Garcia Oliver were Federica Montseny and Diego Abad de Santillan. Montseny was an anarchist novelist and charismatic speaker. Montseny and Abad

---

<sup>4</sup> This debate is described in Fraser, op cit, p. 112.

by political realities to oppose you and hound you. You are now in control of the city and Catalonia because you alone routed the fascist militarists. But let me remind you that you didn't lack help today from men of my party, as well as from the Assault and Presidential Guards...You have won and the power is in your hands. If you don't need me and if you don't want me as President of Catalonia, tell me now and I will be only one more soldier in the struggle...You can count on my loyalty as a man and a party leader who believes that a shameful past came to an end today and I sincerely hope that Catalonia will be in the vanguard of the countries who are the most progressive in social matters."<sup>2</sup>

Companys then proposed the CNT's participation on an Anti-fascist Militia Committee, controlled by the Popular Front parties, to run the armed effort against the fascist military. This was a clever gambit because its nominal independence of the state would allow anarchists to say they weren't participating in a government body but would draw them into a course of action controlled by the Popular Front party leaders, and would leave the government intact.

It was the personal opinion of Sanz, Durruti and Garcia Oliver that the CNT should overthrow the *Generalitat*,<sup>3</sup> but they didn't express that opinion to Companys. They told him that the CNT had to decide what to do. That night, the CNT local labor council in Barcelona had a meeting to decide its stance on this question. At that meeting, Garcia Oliver argued that "the movement should take power." Felix Carrasquer, a schoolteacher, and Diego Abad de Santillan, both representing the FAI, argued against. The debate, however, was framed in terms of the question: "Should we impose our vision of libertarian communism? Should the CNT rule alone?" Carrasquer and Abad de Santillan argued that this would be a dicta-

---

<sup>2</sup> Abel Paz, op cit, p. 213.

<sup>3</sup> According to Ricardo Sanz, interview in the 1970s, quoted in Fraser, op cit, p. 110.

electoral politics, various anarchists worried that this was the direction the *treintistas* were headed.

FAI groups in Catalonia were also worried about a Leninist group organizing in the CNT unions. In 1930 the Workers Federation of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands had merged with the majority from the Catalan Communist Party (*Partit Comunista Catala* – PCC) to form the Workers and Peasants Bloc (*Bloc Obrer i Camperol* – BOC). The BOC was an anti-Stalinist group that identified, nonetheless, with the Leninist model of a "vanguard party." The BOC was especially strong in Lleida. A leading figure in the CNT in Lleida was Joaquin Maurin, a popular teacher. Maurin was the leader of the BOC. The BOC also tried to gain control of libertarian *ateneos* in Catalonia. The main decision-making body in an *ateneo* would be the periodic assemblies that elected the administrative committee of the *ateneo*. The BOC would show up in force to these assemblies to gain control of the administrative committee.

By 1932 the FAI had gained sufficient hegemony in the CNT that it was able to get the *treintista*- and BOC-dominated unions expelled. As a result, the CNT lost most of its union organization in Lleida. In 1934 the BOC-controlled unions formed a new labor federation, the Workers Federation of Union Unity (*Federación Obrera de Unidad Sindical* – FOUS). In 1935 the BOC merged with a smaller Leninist group and changed its name to Workers Party of Marxist Unification (*Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* – POUM).<sup>3</sup>

In 1933 right-wing parties won the elections, and Spain entered a period of repressive government, known as the *biennio negro* ("two black years"). At this time Largo Caballero and much of the Socialist Party began to move to the left. Caballero began talking about the need for "proletarian revolution" and "a workers' government."

---

<sup>3</sup> Victor Alba and Stephen Schwartz, *Spanish Marxism versus Soviet Communism: A History of the POUM*.

A number of events led to the PSOE's turn to the left: the rise to power of Hitler in Germany and of the clerical-fascist Christian Social Party in Austria, rising unemployment, the popular outrage at the Casas Viejas massacre, the intransigence of Spanish employers. The small amounts of money made available to provide land for landless laborers by the government were totally inadequate to deal with the magnitude of land reform needed. There was very little to show from the PSOE's coalition with the liberal Republicans in 1931–33.

One sign of the Socialist move to the left was an attempt at a national general strike in October 1934. Relations with the CNT were still not patched up and poor coordination doomed the strike in most of Spain. The situation was different in Asturias where the UGT and CNT had worked for some months to develop a "Workers Alliance." Thus in October the two unions seized control of the region for two weeks, in a joint uprising. But they were isolated. When the army was sent in to crush the rebellion, thousands were killed and many thousands sent to prison. Wives and daughters of the rebels were raped and mutilated by the Foreign Legion — an army unit made up of thugs and criminals from various countries. The uprising frightened the elite classes while the violent repression alienated the working class.

## The Debate in the CNT Over Political Power

According to his associates, Lluís Companys was anxious and nervous on July 20<sup>th</sup>. His police chief, Escofet, had just warned him that the police could no longer ensure a re-assertion of government authority.<sup>1</sup> The CNT now held *de facto* armed power in Catalonia. Companys was the president of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (Commonwealth of Catalonia — an autonomous regional parliamentary government) and head of the populist, Catalan nationalist *Esquerra* (*Partit Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* — Left Republican Party of Catalonia). The *Esquerra* had defeated the Catalan League (*Lliga Catalana*), the party of Catalan big business, in the elections of February 1936. The Catalan middle strata — owners of small mercantile and industrial businesses, small landlords, lawyers and professionals, managers, family farmers — were the main social base of the *Esquerra*.

Companys was the former lawyer of the CNT, and knew many of the anarchists. He needed to figure out an appeal to them that would prevent the overthrow of his government.

Ricardo Sanz, Buenaventura Durruti, and Joan Garcia Oliver were leading activists on the CNT regional defense committee, and members of *Nosotros* ("Us") — a FAI group. Companys invited them to his office on July 20<sup>th</sup>. Companys told them: "First of all I must say that the CNT and the FAI have never been treated with the proper importance which they deserve. You have always been harshly prosecuted. And I, who used to be with you, was forced

---

<sup>1</sup> Fraser, *op cit*, p. 110.

own. Thousands of men and women from the CNT unions were recruited. The CNT defense committee requisitioned motor vehicles — taxis, cars of the well-to-do, buses, and trucks. Motorized militia units called *columns* were organized for the purpose of mounting an offensive to drive the army out of Catalonia and nearby regions. A typical column was about the size of a military division. The ultimate decision-making authority in each column was the assembly of the militia members. The assembly elected the commanding officer (“chief delegate”) of the column. The sub-units each elected a delegate to a “war committee” — the administrative committee of the column. A sympathetic non-com or officer from the Spanish army was attached to each column as a technical advisor. The overall direction of the columns was the work of the CNT union defense committee.

During the summer of 1936, the labor militia columns from Valencia and Catalonia drove the fascist army out of Catalonia and 100 kilometers west across the region of Aragon — the largest amount of territory gained and held by the anti-fascist forces in the civil war.

Barcelona was the center of the Spanish motor vehicle industry. After July 19<sup>th</sup> the CNT metallurgical union moved to immediately confiscate the assets of this industry, to convert it to war production for the union militia. In a matter of weeks, the CNT had set up 24 metalworking and chemical factories making shells, explosives and armored vehicles for the revolutionary labor army.

## Left-Libertarian Vision

By early 1936 the membership of the UGT and CNT union organizations was at an all-time high. With the country gripped by intense debate about its future, a wave of strikes spread throughout the country, including numerous community-wide general strikes. With the victory of the liberal/socialist coalition in the elections in February, workers could anticipate a breathing space in which to organize strikes and press for change. The farm worker unions were carrying out their land reform through mass land seizures. The *treintista* theoretician Joan Peiró told a journalist in May: “The masses are moving towards revolution.”

With right-wing activists calling for the army to take power, many people were anticipating a military *coup d’etat*. In the midst of this atmosphere of mobilization and crisis, the CNT held a national congress at Zaragoza. By 1935 the Catalan anarchist groups had moved away from their earlier insurrectionary phase and towards reconciliation with the *treintistas*. To have the maximum unity for the battles ahead, the *FAIstas* invited the *treintistas* back into the CNT.

Among the issues taken up at the congress was the CNT’s vision for what kind of society it wanted to create, which it called “libertarian communism.” The vision document adopted by the Zaragoza congress attempted to synthesize the communalist anarchist and libertarian syndicalist influences on Spanish Left-libertarian thinking about post-capitalist society.

A dual structure of governance for the society was envisioned, based on both workplace assemblies and assemblies of residents in villages or neighborhoods. The workplace assemblies would elect

workplace councils and be linked into national industrial federations, to manage the various industries.

Strong emphasis was placed on the “free municipality” and its autonomy, reflecting the communalist anarchist influence. This would be an institution rooted in assemblies of the residents in villages or urban neighborhoods. In a large city, such as Barcelona, the assemblies would elect the Municipal Council. The members of the council would continue to work a regular job in social production, and important issues would be referred back to the base assemblies for decision.

In the version of social planning proposed by Diego Abad de Santillan,<sup>1</sup> the various self-managing national industrial federations would be linked into an Economics Council, as a coordinating body. But the actual plans were to be developed by regional and national congresses of delegates from the industrial federations, with the help of support staff. This is, in effect, a democratic, syndicalist version of central planning.

The Zaragoza congress vision document differs from Abad de Santillan’s proposal by adding the structure of residential assemblies and geographic federations of these as the expression of political self-rule but also as the channel for consumer input, with responsibility for articulating proposals for public goods such as health care, media, town beautification, and housing. But how exactly would consumer input be plugged into the system of social planning? In fact the Zaragoza document doesn’t say. Traditional anarchism lacked a concept of participatory planning<sup>2</sup> — interac-

---

<sup>1</sup> Diego Abad de Santillan, *El organismo económico de la revolución* (translated into English under the title *After the Revolution*).

<sup>2</sup> The idea of *participatory planning* was first developed in the 1970s by a number of radical economists. The most well-known version is the “participatory economics” model developed by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel. An early version was “Participatory Planning” in *Socialist Visions*, Steve Roskamm Shalom, ed.

that company ordered tankers at sea to put into ports controlled by the fascist army. The company provided \$5 million of gasoline on credit.

Meanwhile, officers in the British navy in Gibraltar were horrified at the sight of Spanish warships run by lower-rank sailors showing casual disregard for traditional rules of dress and exchanging clenched-fist salutes. The British naval officers directly aided the Spanish fascists. When the Spanish army was besieging the coastal town of Algeciras from the landside, sailors of the Spanish fleet attempted to protect the town by firing their ships’ guns at the army. The British navy blocked this by moving British ships in front of the town.

In towns that were taken by the army, a purge committee was set up. Typically this would consist of a police official, a priest, a representative of the fascist Falange, and a local landowner. Lists were drawn up of known leftists and executions were carried out systematically. According to a member of the Falange: “Eighty percent of those being executed in the rearguard were workers. The repression was aimed at decimating the working class, destroying its power...It was a class war.”<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that authorities executed between 100,000 and 200,000 people in the fascist zone during the civil war.

After the defeat of the army in Barcelona on July 20<sup>th</sup>, hundreds of thousands of people poured out into the streets, to celebrate the victory. The chief of police, Frederic Escofet, worried about growing CNT power, sent police to the military arms depot at Sant Andreu where 30,000 rifles were stored. They arrived too late. The CNT had already confiscated the weapons.<sup>2</sup> The CNT also seized the fortifications on Montjuich, overlooking Barcelona.

In addition to distributing arms to its neighborhood defense groups, the CNT moved immediately to create an army of its

---

<sup>1</sup> Dionisius Ridruejo, interviewed in the early 1970s, Fraser, op cit, p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> Fraser, op cit, p. 71.

slaughter. In 1979 a mass grave was uncovered outside Zaragoza with 7,000 bodies.

Almost everywhere in Spain where union activists moved aggressively against the military uprising and were joined by the police, the army *coup* was defeated. In Madrid many members of the Assault Guard were socialists. There were not many places where the people defeated the army without the aid of the police. Nowhere in Spain did army soldiers rebel against their officers unless they were being besieged by angry workers and police.

The officers in the Spanish navy were mostly blue-blood sons of the land-owning oligarchy. They had a low opinion of the lower ranks of sailors. Many Spanish sailors had previously worked in the Spanish commercial shipping industry where they had often been members of the CNT or UGT unions. They had a low opinion of their officers. The night before July 19<sup>th</sup> sailors in the Spanish fleet held secret meetings, elected ship committees, and proceeded to arrest or shoot their fascist officers.

At the end of two weeks, the fascist generals had lost about half the personnel of the army in Spain, 40 percent of the police personnel, two-thirds of the navy and most of the air force. The army *coup* had been defeated in two-thirds of Spain, including the industrialized areas and the big cities.

The most important force available to the fascist generals was the 25,000-man Army of Africa, a battle-hardened colonial force of mercenaries and thugs. With the Spanish sailors in control of the country's warships in July, and these ships prowling the straits of Gibraltar, the water-borne transit of the Army of Africa to Spain from Morocco was blocked momentarily. At this point, Nazi Germany came to the aid of the fascist Spanish generals by providing German aircraft and pilots to ferry the Army of Africa to Spain — the first airlift of an entire army into action in military history. With oil refineries and gasoline stocks seized by the workers in Spain, the fascist army was in danger of running out of gas. Texaco then provided another form of international aid. The CEO of

tive development of a social plan through consumer/worker negotiation.

The Zaragoza document provided for the linking of the free municipalities into regional and national People's Congresses. In effect, this provided for local, regional and national *legislatures*. The document also envisions a "People's Militia" —in other words, an army — as a means of defense of the new social order.<sup>3</sup> A structure that can make rules for a society and defend its rule-making authority with military force is in fact a polity, a form of government. If a Left-libertarian polity isn't a *state*, then a distinction is needed between a polity (or structure of governance) and a state. Traditional anarchist writing on this subject was not very clear.

Peter Kropotkin's attempt to make this distinction leads towards the emphasis on local autonomy and decentralization characteristic of Spanish communalist anarchism: Because "the State was established for the precise purpose of imposing the rule of" dominating classes, a move towards socialization of the economy and "liberating labor" requires "a new form of political organization" that is "more popular, more decentralized, and nearer to the folk-mote self-government" than "representative government," the type of state characteristic of capitalism, for Kropotkin.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Zaragoza congress endorsed a proposal for a "revolutionary workers' alliance" with the UGT union federation, the congress failed to discuss actual strategy or a program for the immediate situation that the CNT faced. As a result, the CNT would be forced to "improvise in total incoherence" (in the words of Ce-

---

<sup>3</sup> Excerpts from the Zaragoza congress vision document are translated into English in Robert Alexander, *The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, Volume One*, pp. 48–67.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism" in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets: A Collection of Writings by Peter Kropotkin*, Roger N. Baldwin, ed., pp. 183–184.

sar M. Lorenzo)<sup>5</sup>two months later, in the aftermath of the military *coup d'etat*.

## Coup

The army takeover began in Spain in the early morning hours of July 19<sup>th</sup>. At 5 AM factory sirens began going off in Barcelona. The CNT had arranged the sirens as a signal to its defense organization that the army was moving out of its bases. The CNT had organized about 200 neighborhood defense groups throughout the Barcelona area, with about two thousand armed activists, and had set up a regional workers defense committee to coordinate them. The night before the *coup* they had seized a cache of arms from a ship in Barcelona harbor.

When the CNT concentrated its forces at one of the army bases in the morning, a corporal in the Spanish army shot his fascist officer and persuaded his fellow soldiers to surrender. Thus the CNT gained access to a large supply of arms. Employees of the street-car company seized the armored car used by the company for the movement of cash and used it as an armored vehicle in the fight. Once the CNT had gone into action against the army, rank-and-file *asaltos* joined the fight. In Barceloneta, a working class neighborhood around the docks, a police major began handing out weapons to anyone who could show a union card. Pilots of the Spanish air force began bombing and strafing positions of the army around Barcelona.

Nowhere in Spain did rank-and-file members of the police take the initiative to fight the army on their own. Where workers failed to take aggressive, armed action and trusted to liberal government officials, the police played a waiting game. In the CNT stronghold of Zaragoza, in Aragon, a local CNT leader trusted a local liberal Republican official. When the army revolted, the result was a terrible

---

<sup>5</sup> In the words of Cesar M. Lorenzo, *Los anarquistas y el poder*, p. 92.



The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Tom Wetzel

Workers Power and the Spanish Revolution

November 2, 2018

Retrieved on 2020-04-11 from [libcom.org](http://libcom.org)

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)

As in most cases of workers' self-management in Barcelona, no new shop stewards committees were elected after the wood union committees were transformed into administrative councils for management of the industry. A number of the CNT veterans interviewed by Ronald Fraser for *Blood of Spain* believed that this failure to re-create a separate union organization was a mistake.

Elimination of the class system is not merely a formal process of expropriation and creation of a new organization. Job definitions need to be re-thought, power equalized through learning new skills and workers taking over tasks formerly done by "professionals." Ingrained habits of giving and obeying orders need to be broken down. Because the new system inherits differences in skills, education and habits from hierarchical systems of power, there is a danger of expertise and decision-making being re-consolidated into some new hierarchy. Perhaps the union organization — separate from the structure of self-management of the industry — was needed to look out for the interests of the workers in the course of this process of transition.

Another industry that was totally re-organized was hair-cutting. Before July 19<sup>th</sup>, there had been 1,100 hairdressing parlors in Barcelona, most of them extremely marginal. The 5,000 assistant hairdressers were among the lowest-paid workers in Barcelona. The *Generalitat* had decreed a 40-hour week and 15 percent wage increase after July 19<sup>th</sup> —one of the *Esquerra's* attempts to woo worker support. This spelled ruin for many hairdressing shops. A general assembly was held and it was agreed to shut down all the unprofitable shops. The 1,100 shops were replaced by a network of 235 neighborhood haircutting centers, with better equipment and lighting than the old shops. Due to the efficiencies gained, it was possible to raise wages by 40 percent. The entire network was

run through assemblies of the CNT barber's union. The former owners became members of the union.<sup>8</sup>

To some critics, the socialization of the haircutting industry was a mistake: "What in reality was being collectivized?" asked Sebastia Clara, a *treintista* government employee in Catalonia; "A pair of scissors, a razor, a couple of barber's chairs. And what was the result? All those small owners...now turned against us."<sup>9</sup>

Clara's comment overlooks the efficiency gains captured as higher wages for the workers and the idea that socialization is not just about physical assets but changing social power relationships. The aim of the libertarian syndicalist movement was to do away with the subordination of workers inherent in being hired to work for a boss for wages.

Health care was another industry transformed by the revolution. A new 7000-member CNT *sindicato unico* for the health industry in Barcelona — including 3,200 male nurses — was created in September, 1936. The various professions were organized as "sections" of the health union. This union expropriated the hospitals and created and managed a new socialized health care system in Catalonia.

Before July, medical practices were typically owned by a senior physician, and the younger doctors were hired as assistants. Medical services were focused on wealthier neighborhoods. Poor villages often had no doctor. The new system was intended to provide a more equitable distribution of health resources. If a poor village didn't have a doctor, the health union would find one.

The health union tried to do away with private practices but was not able to get the majority of doctors to agree to this. All of the doctors were required to work three hours a day for the health union, which left them with enough time in the day to see private patients. When working for the union, all doctors were paid the

---

<sup>8</sup> Augustin Souchy, *Nacht über Spanien*, excerpt translated in Sam Dolgoff, ed., *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution 1936–1939*, pp. 93–94.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser, op cit, p. 233.

same pay rate — but their hourly rate was about four times a typical worker's wage.

The government provided some funds to help pay for the socialized health care system in Catalonia, but this was not sufficient to cover all costs. Although visits to the new network of outpatient clinics were free, the health union charged fees for office visits to doctors and for surgery. As a result, many unions, collectivized industries and village collectives entered into special agreements with the health union to provide free health care for their members and their families. The health union ran dental clinics and also took over research and manufacture of pharmaceuticals.

This socialized health care system was expanded throughout the anti-fascist zone through the work of the 40,000-member CNT national industrial federation for health care, consisting of 40 local unions.<sup>10</sup>

The main part of the public transit system in Barcelona was the streetcar system, which operated 60 routes throughout the metropolitan area. This system was operated by Barcelona Tramways, owned mainly by Belgian investors. Of the 7,000 employees of this company, 6,500 belonged to the CNT transport *sindicato unico*.

On July 20<sup>th</sup> an armed group from the CNT transport union discovered that the top management of Barcelona Tramways had fled. A mass meeting of the transit workers was held the following day and the assembly voted overwhelmingly to expropriate the transit companies in the name of the people. Three private bus companies, two funiculars, and the subway were taken over along with the streetcar company.

The streetcar system had been badly mauled in the street fighting — tracks had been damaged, overhead wires were knocked down in places, equipment boxes were shot up, and streetcar tracks were blocked by barricades. Working night and day, the transit workers

---

<sup>10</sup> Gaston Leval, op cit, pp. 264–278.

got the streetcar network working within five days. Over time the streetcars were repainted in the diagonally divided red and black paint scheme of the CNT. Prior to July 19<sup>th</sup>, equipment boxes of the electric power company in the middle of streets made it necessary for Barcelona streetcars to negotiate tight curves around them; this had been a source of derailments. After the union takeover, the workers arranged with the worker-run public utility federation to relocate the electric power equipment so that the tracks could be straightened out.

The various modes — buses, subway, streetcars — were separate union “sections”, as were the repair depots. These all were managed through elected committees, answerable to assemblies of the workers. An engineer was elected to each administrative committee, to facilitate consultation between manual workers and engineers. There was an overall assembly for decisions that affected the transit-system as a whole. There was no top manager or executive director.

Barcelona Tramways had operated with a fare zone system which meant that it cost more for people in the outer working class suburbs to get into the city center. The worker-run transit operation switched to a flat fare throughout the metropolitan area, to equalize fare costs to riders. Despite this lowering of the fare, the worker-run transit system operated at a profit. A large amount of French and American machine tools were purchased, to make the transit operation largely self-sufficient in spare parts. The CNT transport union entered into an arrangement with the new health union to ensure free medical care for transit workers and their families.

Due to war-time restrictions on automobile travel, ridership increased by 62 percent the first year on the worker-managed transit network. It was not possible to obtain new streetcars. To accommodate the increased ridership, the workers redesigned the layout of the maintenance facility, to reduce the downtime for streetcars during routine maintenance. A number of junked streetcars were

rebuilt and put back into service. New, light-weight cars were built for the two funiculars.

After the passage of the *Generalitat* collectivization decree in October, 1936, the transit network, which was being managed by the union, was re-organized as the United Public Service Collective, formally separate from the CNT union. In some sections of the collective where there was a UGT union — as on the subway — the UGT had delegates on the administrative committees. Before July 19<sup>th</sup>, the *peones* (track laborers) were the lowest paid workers and the skilled workers made 50 percent more. After the seizure of the industry, all workers other than the skilled workers received the same pay, and the skilled workers (such as machinists) received only 6 percent more. The workers volunteered on Sundays in workshops set up by the transit union to build war materials for the labor militia.<sup>11</sup>

In September, a conference was held in Barcelona to work out a general solution for the expropriated workplaces in the economy as a whole. How far could the CNT proceed towards socialization? What should the CNT do with the expropriated firms? Typically, facilities were managed by the union when they were expropriated. The idea of converting expropriated enterprises into cooperatives, operating in a market economy, had never been advocated by the CNT before the war. For the first time, this idea was proposed at this conference as a temporary stop-gap solution, until full socialization could be implemented. The use of the word “collective” to describe this stop-gap solution was proposed at this conference by Joan Fábregas, a Catalan nationalist accountant who joined the CNT after July of '36. “Up to that moment, I had never heard of collectivization as a solution for industry — the department stores were being run by the union,” recalled Joan Ferrer, the CNT commercial union secretary. “What the new system meant was that each collectivized firm would retain its individual character, but

---

<sup>11</sup> Gaston Leval, *ibid*, pp. 245–253.

with the ultimate objective of federating all enterprises within the same industry.”<sup>12</sup>

At that conference, the more powerful unions, such as transportation, public utilities, woodworkers, and public entertainment, which had already proceeded to the first phase of socialization — consolidation of an entire industry into an industrial federation — wanted to continue on this path. The smaller, weaker unions wanted to convert the expropriated enterprises into cooperatives.

The self-managed collectives were a great affirmation of the capacity of the working class to manage production. According to Victor Alba — a member of the POUM during the revolution:

“The collectives of 1936 not only didn’t fail, but they were a success. Given the circumstances, they demonstrated the principle that workers can administer enterprises with equal or more efficiency than their employers.”<sup>13</sup>

Andreu Capdevila, a CNT textile militant in Barcelona, said that before collectivization, the rank-and-file of the union “didn’t know how to talk.” They let a handful of CNT activists deal with management for them. But this changed with collectivization:

“It was amazing. Everyone turned into a parrot. Everyone wanted to say what he or she thought and felt. They obviously felt themselves in charge now, with the right to speak for themselves.”<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, the incompleteness of the revolution — the continued existence of the market and the state, the failure to create a system of popular social planning — created problems.

---

<sup>12</sup> Fraser, op cit, p. 212.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Robert Alexander, *The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War, Volume One*, p. 487.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Fraser, op cit, pp. 214–215.

One problem that emerged was the inequality between collectives due to differences in the inherited equipment, access to markets, or other differences in their situation. For example, first-phase socialization was not carried out initially in the textile industry in Barcelona. Each firm continued as a separate collective. According to Josep Costa, secretary of the CNT textile union in the nearby suburb of Badalona:

“We didn’t see the Barcelona textile collectives as models for our experience. Individual collectivized mills acted there from the beginning as though they were completely autonomous units, marketing their own products as they could and paying little heed to the general situation. It caused a horrific problem. It was a sort of popular capitalism.”<sup>15</sup>

In Badalona, the CNT union coordinated all the mills throughout the town. The textile industry, like other manufacturing industries in Catalonia, had produced mainly for the Spanish market. With a third of the country in the hands of the fascist army, industry in Catalonia lost much of its market. Catalonia’s industrial output fell by 30 percent during the first year of collectivization.

Finally, in February, 1937 a joint CNT-UGT textile industry congress was held in Catalonia to establish a Textile Industry Council—an industrial federation that would introduce coordination and end competition between workplaces. The congress agreed that collectivization of individual plants had been a mistake and that it was necessary to proceed rapidly towards complete socialization of the industry.

Often collectives dealt with the loss of markets by working shorter hours or paying people who weren’t working. According to Abad de Santillan, more than 15,000 people were still being paid for non-work in Catalonia in December, 1936. As he noted,

---

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Fraser, *ibid.*, p. 229.

it was socially inefficient to have a large number of people under-employed or unemployed; the society was losing the work they could do.<sup>16</sup> A system of social planning would have allowed them to re-allocate jobs in accordance with demand and need for output.

The CNT's failure to consolidate political power was itself a reason for the incompleteness of the economic revolution. The *Generalitat* government controlled foreign credits and the financial system. Over time, the collectivized industry became heavily indebted to the government. This was eventually used to secure ever more state control in the later years of the civil war, as the Communist Party gained increasing power and moved towards a nationalized economy.

The CNT's wage aim in the revolution was the *sueldo unico* ("single wage"). If implemented, this would have meant that everyone would be paid at the same hourly rate. A CNT textile union activist explained the rationale for the *sueldo unico*:

"We libertarians have a maxim which is binding: each shall produce according to his abilities, each shall consume according to his needs. Production is like a clock—each part is interdependent. If one part fails the clock will no longer show the hour. It's very difficult to determine which of the workers fulfilling so many different tasks is the most important. The miner digging out the coal, the worker transporting it to the factory, the stoker shoveling it into the factory furnace. Without any of them the process would stop. All should be paid the same wage; the only difference should depend on whether a man is single or is married and has a fam-

---

<sup>16</sup> Diego Abad de Santillan, statement from December, 1936, appended to the 1937 addition of *After the Revolution*, p. 121.



Traditional anarchism was ambiguous or inconsistent on the question of what replaces the state. There was a lack of clarity about the need for a new type of polity to perform the necessary political functions — making the basic rules, adjudicating accusations of criminal conduct and disputes between people, and defending the basic social arrangement against internal or external attack and enforcing the basic rules. The *political* functions of society cannot be done away with any more than social production could be. But the political functions can be carried on by a structure of popular self-governance, rooted in the participatory democracy of assemblies in the communities and workplaces.

---

*Tom Wetzel is active with Worker's Solidarity Alliance in the San Francisco Bay Area and has organized around housing and transit issues in San Francisco. The text has been lightly edited for clarity from the original.*

ily; in the latter case, he should get so much extra per dependent.”<sup>17</sup>

The *sueldo unico* was implemented in some industries and localities. One such location was the city of Hospitalet de Llobregat, a working class suburb on the south edge of Barcelona. Textiles were the largest industry but there were also blast furnaces, foundries and metal-working plants. The CNT unions in Hospitalet were part of the labor council of Bajo Llobregat which had advocated overthrowing the *Generalitat* government in July of '36. In the city of Hospitalet the CNT did sweep away the old city government, replacing it with a revolutionary committee. The CNT revolutionary committee held various neighborhood assemblies to get feedback. This did not quite equal the pre-war CNT idea of a “free municipality” because the geographic assemblies did not elect the new municipal council; it was controlled by the unions.

Due to differences in the economic situation of collectives, the Hospitalet CNT decided to implement the *sueldo unico* by proceeding to socialization of the town's economy, with the more well-off collectives cross-subsidizing the less well-off.<sup>18</sup>

The Revolutionary Railway Federation also initially equalized the wages of all the railway workers. At that time, the guards at railway grade crossings in Spain were usually women. They were the lowest paid railway workers. These female workers gained the most from the wage equalization on the railways. Later on, however, the railway federation needed to hire several engineers. They were forced to pay these engineers about 2.5 times the wage paid to the other workers.

Under a market economy, educated professionals could use their scarce expertise to demand higher wages and other privileges. This could be dealt with over time in a socialized economy with a system of free education for workers and a systematic campaign to

---

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Fraser, op cit, p. 218.

<sup>18</sup> Gaston Leval, op cit, pp. 289–295.

upgrade workers' skills. But it would take time to do that, and a socialized economy hadn't yet been consolidated.

Catalonia called *Acracia* — the name means “No power.” It seems that Peirats' “No power” anarchism was opposed to any sort of overarching polity or governing structure for Spain.

But this was simply not possible. A unified command was needed in the armed fight against the fascist military. The workers of the CNT and the UGT would insist on unity in the struggle. There were only two ways this could be achieved. Either the CNT took the initiative to replace the existing state apparatus in Catalonia and at the national level, uniting the workers of the CNT and UGT into a working class-controlled governing power, or else the Communists would be successful in uniting the population behind a rebuilding of the state apparatus and a hierarchical army. This was the fundamental dilemma that faced the CNT after July 19<sup>th</sup> 1936.

If the CNT had overthrown the *Generalitat* and brought the UGT and FOUS unions into a regional workers congress to elect a regional labor governing council for Catalonia, it would have put tremendous pressure on Largo Caballero and the UGT leadership to agree to this solution for Spain as a whole. If the proposed structure of national and regional CNT-UGT governing councils and a unified people's militia, controlled by the unions, had been created, the CNT could have blocked the Communist proposals for a hierarchical army and for sending the gold to Russia. The CNT could have blocked the PCE's strategy for gaining state power. By failing to pursue this path, the CNT made the Popular Front strategy inevitable, and thus facilitated the Communists' growing power. Given the fascist side's superiority in arms supplies, creating a working class-controlled polity in Spain was not a guarantee of victory. But it would have improved the chances of success.

To their credit, Badius and the *Amigos* saw that a working-class-controlled polity — a structure of political self-governance — is needed to replace the state, if the working class is to be successful at liberating itself.

collectivized villages and their CNT and UGT unions, to control the Defense Council set up in that region.

The CNT also proposed that the Defense Councils be prohibited from intervening in management of the economy, which would be controlled by a system of worker-managed industrial federations and a system of social planning.

Thus it seems to me that the syndicalist proposal for Defense Councils and a unified and a union-controlled people's militia was a tactic at least potentially consistent with social anarchism.

How does the CNT Defense Council proposal differ from the Leninist concept of "taking power"? It may help to look at the debate in the Russian Communist party in 1921. At that time, Nicholai Bukharin, Alexandra Kollontai and a number of other Bolsheviks proposed a system of management boards for the Russian economy elected by the unions. Lenin denounced this as an "anarcho-syndicalist deviation" because it would give economic power to the "non-party masses" who made up 90 percent of the membership of the unions. By the logic of Lenin's position, he would have to denounce the CNT Defense Council proposal because it would give economic, political and armed power to the "non-party masses" in the unions.

For José Peirats, however the "strength of the anarchosyndicalists" after July 19<sup>th</sup> 1936 lay in the dispersed pattern of power in the anti-fascist zone, broken up into a myriad of local and regional committees.<sup>4</sup> Peirats, who was active in the Libertarian Youth in Catalonia, opposed the CNT joining the Popular Front government but also opposed the alternative of replacing the Republican central government with a CNT-UGT national defense council. In *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, Peirats says that the Defense Council proposal was "just a government under another name." But couldn't that be said of any polity that would provide overall governance for Spain as a whole? Peirats was editor of a journal in

---

<sup>4</sup> José Peirats, op cit, p. 183.

## Mujeres Libres

Wage equality between men and women doing the same work was only achieved sporadically and was most likely in industries where *Mujeres Libres* had organized women's groups. *Mujeres Libres* had been formed as a national organization in the spring of 1936. In Catalonia, *Mujeres Libres* came out of a women's caucus in the CNT unions.

In 1935 the CNT metallurgical *sindicato unico* in Barcelona was paying Soledad Estorach a small stipend as an organizer. Estorach was a factory worker and activist in the Libertarian Youth. The metallurgical union was worried about the lack of involvement of women workers in the union. Estorach discovered that if women tried to speak at CNT union meetings, they'd be laughed at by the men. The problem wasn't just the male chauvinist attitudes of the men. Estorach came to believe that it was necessary for women to have their own autonomous organization — a safe space where they could study social issues, learn public speaking, and become prepared to be activists. Only then would women be able to hold their own with the men in union meetings. The result was a women's caucus in the CNT in Catalonia. The women's caucus also organized child care so that women activists could attend union meetings and get elected as delegates.

*Mujeres Libres* stated that its purpose was to liberate women from the "triple enslavement" of "ignorance, enslavement as women, and enslavement as workers." The women who founded *Mujeres Libres* did not use the label "feminist." They were as class conscious as their male counterparts. And to them, "feminism" was a movement for women to gain access to elite positions in

the professions, management, government. *Mujeres Libres* was oriented to working class women, recruiting nearly 30,000 women during three years of revolution and war.

Despite their loyalty to the CNT movement, the women who formed *Mujeres Libres* insisted that women's liberation was distinct from working class liberation, and refused to be just a subordinate appendage — a “women's auxiliary” — of the FAI and CNT. They didn't believe that the men could liberate women. The leaders of the FAI and CNT, on the other hand, tended to view the idea of an autonomous women's movement as “divisive.”

One area of change in gender relations in Spain during the war was the big increase in women working in industry. As men went off to fight in the anti-fascist people's army, women were recruited to take their place.

The Anti-fascist Women's Association (*Asociación de Mujeres Anti-fascistas* — AMA) was organizing among the women working in industry. The AMA was a “transmission belt” of the Communist Party. With the AMA gaining influence in industries, the CNT activists feared that women would be recruited to the UGT unions. The CNT unions could be pushed aside. To counter this, the local unions of the CNT opened their union halls to *Mujeres Libres*. The unions provided space for child care centers, women's study groups, and literacy classes and apprenticeship programs for women. In collectivized factories, work would be stopped to allow activists from *Mujeres Libres* to give presentations.

An industry where *Mujeres Libres* had a strong presence was public transit. Pura Pérez was a member of *Mujeres Libres* who was one of the first women to drive streetcars in Barcelona. According to Pérez, the men of the CNT transport union took women on “as apprentices, mechanics, and drivers, and really taught us what to do.” The CNT *compañeros*, Pérez recalled, “really got a kick out of” the

It collaborated with the bourgeoisie in the affairs of state, precisely when the state was crumbling away.”<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the advocacy of the union-controlled national and regional Defense Councils, the *Amigos* also advocated the formation of the “free municipalities” — governance structures based on neighborhood or village assemblies of residents — which the CNT had advocated in the program adopted at Zaragoza in May, 1936. Badius called the free municipalities “an authentic revolutionary government.” The *Amigos* also held to the syndicalist program of socialization of the economy from below through union management.

According to Badius, the workers' initiative in the May events in Barcelona showed “the proletariat's unshakeable determination to place a workers' leadership in charge of the armed struggle, the economy and the entire existence of the country. Which is to say (for any anarchist not afraid of the words) that the proletariat was fighting for the taking of power which would have come to pass through the destruction of the old bourgeois instruments and erection in their place of a new structure based on the committees that surfaced in July [1936].”<sup>3</sup> From a social anarchist point of view, a key issue about the proposed Defense Councils would be their accountability to the assemblies at the base. The *Amigos* proposed that the Defense Councils be elected by the union assemblies. But what about the making of policy? A possible solution here would have been to make the Defense Councils get their marching orders from the regional and national congresses proposed in the CNT's Zaragoza program of May, 1936. These would be deliberative bodies, made up of delegates elected by the base assemblies, and with major issues sent back to the base assemblies for decision. The CNT did actually create a regional congress in Aragon, representing the

---

<sup>2</sup> The Friends of Durruti Group, *Towards a Fresh Revolution* (translation of *Hacia una revolución nueva*) (<[http://fraternitelibertaire.free.fr/reserve/towards\\_a\\_fresh\\_revolution.pdf](http://fraternitelibertaire.free.fr/reserve/towards_a_fresh_revolution.pdf)>

<sup>3</sup> Jaime Badius, quoted in Agustín Guillamón, op cit, p. 92.

Calletas and Balius had been staff members of *Solidaridad Obrera* during the campaign for the Defense Council proposal.

In the actual events in May of 1937, the *Amigos* did not have sufficient weight in the CNT to bring about a change of direction. The *Amigos* had some influence among the CNT militia units and the CNT neighborhood defense groups. But the main weight in the CNT in Catalonia were the local union militants, the *delegados* on the local labor councils and the workplace councils in the collectivized industries. If the viewpoint of the *Amigos* had prevailed among the labor councils, they could have gained control of a regional plenary and ousted the Popular Front collaborationist regional committee.

When people find themselves pursuing a course of action, they want to feel that they are justified in doing so. This means there is a tendency for people to find justifications for their actions. By May of 1937 leading anarcho-syndicalists had been following the Popular Front strategy and occupying positions of hierarchical authority in the government and in the army for some time. This was bound to change their outlook. A good example is Joan Garcia Oliver. In July and August of 1936 he had been a champion of the CNT “going for broke,” overthrowing the *Generalitat*, and taking power in its own hands. By March, 1937 his viewpoint had changed; he had become a defender of the Popular Front coalition. This change was shown dramatically by his conduct during the May events, opposing any attempt to broaden the struggle, to seize power for the unions. In their main pamphlet, the *Amigos* criticized the CNT’s failure to take political power in July of 1936: “What happened had to happen. The CNT...did not have a concrete program. We had no idea where we were going...When an organization’s whole existence has been spent preaching revolution, it has an obligation to act whenever a favorable set of circumstances arises. And in July the occasion did present itself. The CNT ought to have leapt into the driver’s seat in the country...In this way we would have won the war and saved the revolution. But [the CNT] did the opposite.

amazed looks on the faces of passengers when they realized that a woman was at the controls of the streetcar.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Information about *Mujeres Libres* is from Martha A. Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*.

## Trajectory of the Spanish Communist Party

Despite the real proletarian revolution underway in Spain, the Spanish Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de España* – PCE) insisted that the immediate agenda in Spain was a “bourgeois democratic revolution,” and that the struggle should be seen as simply the defense of the “democratic republic.”

The PCE’s stance, and the Communist International’s attempt to conceal the actual worker revolution in Spain in its propaganda in other countries, was designed to re-assure the western capitalist “democracies,” it is often said, especially the USA, Britain and France. The Communists and their supporters advanced the view that this was the best way of winning the war against the fascist military.

Much of the historical debate on the role of Communism in the Spanish revolution and civil war has focused on Stalin’s geopolitical designs. The Soviet Union had only just recently begun to emerge from international isolation, joining the League of Nations in 1934. The attempt of the Communists to assuage the fears of the British, American and French capitalist “democracies” was not only a tactic for obtaining arms shipments but also fit in with Stalin’s fears of German militarism, and his desire to either enter into a military pact with the western “democracies” or else draw them into a conflict with the fascist powers. But the PCE developed its own social base in Spain during the civil war. What was the real social meaning of the Spanish Communist Party for Spain? To answer this question, we need to look at the class structure of modern cap-

## The Friends of Durruti

During the May Days fight between the Communist-controlled police and their working class adversaries in Barcelona, an alternative to the CNT leadership’s policy of Popular Front collaboration was proposed by the Friends of Durruti Group (*Agrupación Los Amigos de Durutti*) – a FAI group. The *Amigos* distributed a leaflet during the fighting calling for the CNT to overthrow the *Generalitat*, replacing it with a revolutionary council (*junta*) in Catalonia controlled by the CNT unions. Their leaflet also called for complete socialization of the economy and disarming of the police.

The *Amigos* had been organized in March 1937 on the initiative of CNT militia members who opposed the creation of the new hierarchical Republican army. The group was named for Durruti because of his last fight in the CNT in October, 1936. Horacio Prieto, wanting to make use of Durruti’s popularity, had tried to get him to be one of the CNT ministers in the Popular Front government. Durruti refused. “When the workers expropriate the bourgeoisie, when one attacks foreign property, when public order is in the hands of the workers, when the militia is controlled by the unions, when, in fact, one is in the process of making a revolution from the bottom up,” said Durruti, this is simply incompatible with maintaining Republican state legality.<sup>1</sup>

The *Amigos* were libertarian syndicalists trying to revive the Defense Council program that the CNT had advocated in September-October 1936. Two of the leading activists in the *Amigos* were Liberto Callejas and Jaime Balius. In September and October 1936 both

---

<sup>1</sup> Quote from Durruti in *The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action*, Chap 4 (<[http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/spain/pam\\_ch4.html](http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/spain/pam_ch4.html) >).

ucts to their own desires. Without that, there is only the set of things offered to everyone by the collective. Absence of money led to inefficiencies like people throwing away bread because it was free.

Saturnino Carod believed that the abolition of money had been based on a confusion of money with capital. He insisted that there was a need for a system of social accounting.<sup>7</sup> This would require a monetary unit to encapsulate the value to us of the resources used to produce things. Capital is a social relation of domination, exercised through market purchase of means of production and hiring of workers, to make a profit. Money need not imply the continued existence of that capitalist economic arrangement.

The Communists had helped to form agricultural collectives in other areas. Their real aim wasn't the destruction of the collectives but the destruction of CNT power. While the Communist troops were attacking the CNT in Aragon, the CNT leadership did not allow CNT army units in the area to intervene. The effect of this whole episode was the undermining of morale. This contributed to the fascist army's conquest of Aragon a few months later.

---

<sup>7</sup> Saturnino Carod, quoted in Fraser, op cit, p. 363.

italism. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Marx saw in capitalism mainly a bipolar struggle between capital and labor.

However, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the emergence of the state-regulated, corporate form of capitalism brought with it the emergence of a new main class, which I call the *coordinator class*.<sup>1</sup> Once capitalist ventures had become too large for the entrepreneurs to manage themselves, the capitalists had to concede a realm of power to hierarchies of managers and professionals, in the corporations and the state. The power of the coordinator class is not based on ownership but on a relative monopolization of levers of decision-making and other empowering forms of work. The coordinator class have their own class interests. Moreover, this class has the ability to be a ruling class. The path pioneered by the Bolshevik Party in the Russian revolution was their use of the state to construct a new economic system in which the coordinator class rules, without capitalists.

Limiting our focus to the class dimension of social transformation, there are two different types of anti-capitalist revolution that are possible. A proletarian revolution is a process that, if successful, unravels the structures of class power of the capitalists and coordinators so that there is no longer a class that dominates and exploits the working class. A *coordinatorist* revolution, however, is a trajectory of change that, if successful, dislodges the capitalists from their dominant position but empowers the coordinator class as the new dominating group. The working class remains a subordinate and exploited group.

The PCE's trajectory in Spain is an example of what I call *Left coordinatorism* — the pursuit of strategies and programs that empower the coordinator class, under anti-capitalist or Left rhetoric. Left coordinatorism is the last defense of the class system in a social environment where a working class movement is threatening

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, "A Ticket to Ride: More Locations on the Class Map" in *Between Labor and Capital*, Pat Walker, ed.

its survival. The empowerment of the coordinator class was clear in the strategy of the PCE: the campaign to rebuild the state apparatus; the campaign to build up a hierarchical army and police and recruit the officer corps to the party; the campaign to recruit, and defend the interests of, the middle strata of Spanish society; and the moves during the war towards nationalization and state control of collectivized industries.

The Spanish Communists had a concept of revolution in Spain occurring in stages. The immediate struggle was a “bourgeois democratic” *stage*. This notion of stages was clearly expressed by Georgi Dimitrov, secretary of the Communist International, at a meeting of the international held on July 23, 1936:

“We should not, *at the present stage*, assign the task [to the Spanish Communists] of creating soviets and try to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat in Spain. That would be a fatal mistake. Therefore we must say: act in the guise of defending the Republic; do not abandon the politics of the democratic regime in Spain *at this point*...When our positions have been strengthened, we can go further.” (emphasis added)<sup>2</sup>

There was an international geopolitical struggle between the Soviet coordinator elite and the capitalist imperialist powers. Capitalist imperialism needs to have as much of the planet as possible open to penetration and exploitation by peripatetic private capital. Any revolution — whether coordinatorist, nationalist, or proletarian — that “takes out” areas of the world from accessibility to imperialist capital will weaken world capitalism and, for that reason, will tend to be opposed by the capitalist imperialist powers. For the same reason, any coordinatorist revolution would be in the interests of the Soviet coordinator elite.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov, op cit, p. 11.

presiding, anyone who wanted to quit the collective was allowed to do so. The membership in the collective dropped to 1,500. Thus 60 percent of the residents still voluntarily supported the collective, despite the threatening presence of Communist troops. About 70 percent of the agricultural collectives in Aragon survived the Communist putsch.

The collectivization in Aragon had a dual purpose. To the extent the initiative was local, the motivation was community self-management and equality. But the labor army in Aragon, only a few kilometers from the villages, did not have a very reliable line of supply to Catalonia and Valencia where the militias had been formed. The Aragon villages also had the role of providing food for the labor militia.

Often, money was abolished and a system of rationing imposed. By controlling the consumption of the local population, a surplus could be generated to supply the revolutionary army. Working for the anti-fascist militia for free was a matter of pride for the supporters of the Left in the villages, and a source of resentment among the village right-wingers.

But the abolition of money was itself another source of discontent among the *campesinos*. According to the CNT president of the village collective in Alcorisa, the *campesinos* didn't like the idea of taking things for free from the common store because they felt it was like begging.<sup>6</sup> They believed they *earned* a right to a certain level of consumption through their work.

The anarchist secretary of the successful collective at Mas de las Matas said that the abolition of money “turned out to be one of our biggest mistakes.” He believed that it would have been better to pay people for work, and provide additional allowances for the needs of dependents.

If able-bodied adults earn an entitlement to consume based on work, this allows each individual to tailor their requests for prod-

---

<sup>6</sup> CNT village committee president, quoted in Fraser, op cit, p. 362.



was that it made it more feasible to use machinery, which the town bought for use in the farming operation. The secretary of the collective was a 26-year old self-employed anarchist cabinet-maker. He brought his own tools into the collective. The collective controlled all services. The political power exercised by the town collective is illustrated by the fact that they banned the hiring of anyone to work for wages. They also banned gambling and sale of alcohol.<sup>4</sup>

A group of 50 landowning farm families in the village refused to join the collective. An arrangement was made for the collective to market the products of the “individualists”, as anarchists called them, and to provide them with services and supplies. It was necessary to have an arrangement of this sort if small-holders were to be allowed to continue to farm their own small plots because the collective controlled services and money was initially abolished in Mas de las Matas and other villages, and later the federation of collectives of Aragon set up a uniform rationing system throughout the region. Apparently, no such arrangement to allow for independent small-holders was created in Angüés.

Felix Carrasquer, a schoolteacher in Catalonia and FAI member, recalled that in his visits to villages in Aragon he tried to rein in “fanatics” who tried to force collectivization of all the land. “You have got to leave people free to decide what they want to do,” he reminded them. He said that forcing all the smallholders into collectives only happened in a few cases because there were only a handful of villages in Aragon where “collectivization was total.”<sup>5</sup> The presence of “individualists” farming their own plots, in Mas de las Matas and most other villages in Aragon refutes the Communist claim that shall-holders were *universally* coerced into collectives throughout Aragon.

When Lister’s troops invaded Aragon in August, 1937, an assembly of residents was called in Mas de las Matas and, with police

---

<sup>4</sup> Gaston Leval, op cit, pp. 136–143.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Fraser, op cit, p. 366.

The slogan of defending the “bourgeois democratic Republic” had two meanings for the Spanish Communists. First, it was under this slogan that the Communist Party in Spain worked to recruit members of the small business and coordinator classes, by defending their interests.

The second meaning of the PCE’s defense of the “bourgeois republic” was their campaign to rebuild the Republican state apparatus. The Communist Party’s long-term revolutionary strategy was *permeationist*. With the rebuilding of a hierarchical army and police machine, the Communists would work to capture control of the officer positions. Their aim was to use this as the means to eventually take state power in Spain.

At the end of September, the Popular Front government began the process of creating a new national police force, called the National Republican Guard, with 28,000 members by December. At the same time, a huge force of 40,000 customs and border police was created under the direction of Dr. Juan Negrín, a social-democrat and professor of physiology from a wealthy family. In November, the government decided to replace the worker militias with a conventional top-down army. The Communist Party was able to gain control of the new academy created to train officers. The party also controlled the new Commissariat of War which was set up to exercise political control over the army through a network of political commissars. The Communists controlled the flow of newspapers to the troops at the front. Communists put great pressure on officers to take a party card. Those that didn’t were undermined. The PCE demoralized the army by “acting with the wildest sectarianism,” a Left Socialist member of the Unified Socialist Youth recalled.<sup>3</sup>

The PCE in July of ’36 started from a weak position. It had less than 40,000 members in Spain, and very little support within the

---

<sup>3</sup> Sócrates Gómez, quoted in Fraser, op cit, p. 333.

Spanish working class. The Communists used several tactics to overcome this weak position.

First, they pursued a strategy of cannibalizing the Socialist Party base. A number of the leaders of the socialist youth organization (including Santiago Carillo) were taken on tours in Russia and wine and dine. These secret Communists negotiated a merger between the Socialist and Communist youth organizations, creating the Unified Socialist Youth (*Juventud Socialista Unificada* – JSU). The merger deal had stipulated that the politics of the JSU would be decided at a congress. The Socialist youth group was larger than the Communist youth organization and contained many followers of the Caballero-oriented left-wing of the Socialist Party. The Left Socialists were prevented from gaining control of the JSU by simply not holding the promised congress. The Catalan Communists had gained control of the Socialist Party section in Catalonia through a similar merger tactic. In the fall of 1936 Communist leaders tried to persuade Largo Caballero to agree to a merger of the Communist and Socialist parties. By then he saw what the result of this policy had been and refused.

Land-owning farmers, shopkeepers, owners of small- to medium-sized businesses, managers and white collar workers had been the mass social base of the *Esquerra* in Catalonia. These middle strata were often frightened by the expropriation of businesses and buildings, and union management of industry. In other countries threatened by proletarian revolution, these social strata have become the mass base for fascism. But in Catalonia the middle strata were anti-fascist because they were Catalan nationalists.

Recruitment of these Republican middle strata was the second tactic that propelled the growth of the PCE. The Communists were successful at recruiting the middle strata throughout the anti-fascist zone because the Communists appeared to be a much tougher and more disciplined defender of their class interests than the old Republican parties.

But they described the town as being managed by a committee of 20 men who went around with pistols on their waists and did no work. None of the landowning *campesinos* were allowed to stay out of the collective. Farmers who tried to leave couldn't buy fertilizer or seed since money had been abolished and the resources were controlled by the collective. The committee running the town were also lining their pockets. All the best food ended up in their houses, the CNT couple alleged.

The committeemen rode around in cars that had been expropriated from well-to-do families. Unlike the other women in the village, their wives were also exempt from work. Village assemblies were rarely invoked and there was no procedure for recall of the committee members. The CNT couple said there was great discontent. They believed that another revolution would have been needed to get rid of this new managerial elite.<sup>3</sup>

Communist propaganda portrayed all of Aragon as being like that village of Angüés. In fact, there were other towns where the situation was very different.

Mas de las Matas was a prosperous town of small-holding farmers in Aragon, with about 2,500 residents. Before the war, the CNT union had about 200 members. The anarchists initiated the collectivization of the town by calling an assembly of the residents. The assembly elected an Anti-fascist committee – half were CNT members and half were supporters of the Left Republican party. The assembly and elected committee became both the new government of the town and a means of socializing the town's economy. This is an example of what the Spanish anarchists called a "free municipality." This is one of the few places where the anarchists actually constructed this type of geographic, assembly-based governance structure during the revolution.

Numerous farmers brought their small plots into the town collective, agreeing to work the lands collectively. An advantage of this

---

<sup>3</sup> Fraser, op cit, pp. 367–369.

could farm. The aim of the CNT and FNTT was to do away with the hiring of wage labor in the countryside.

But the PCE was opposed to expropriation of any landowners who hadn't fled. However, the more prosperous land-owning farmers were usually right-wingers, and were often the old right-wing *caciques* (political bosses) in the villages. The Communist policy of defending them — even to the point of helping them take back land that had been collectivized — strengthened the right-wing element in the countryside.

Actual CNT practice of rural collectivization differed by area. In Andalusia, the CNT's policy was the same as that of the PCE. The CNT in Andalusia expropriated no land at all. They set up collectives on estates of owners who fled, and using the small plots that *campesinos* voluntarily brought with them.<sup>1</sup>

The dispute about Aragon was *also* about the extent to which small-holding *campesinos* who did *not* hire wage-workers were forced to merge their small plots into collectives. Doing this was contrary to Kropotkin's advice in *The Conquest of Bread* and was not pursued by the CNT in other areas of the anti-fascist zone.

Saturnino Carod was the son of a landless farm laborer in Aragon and the leader of a CNT militia column. Carod was well aware of how the *campesinos* were attached to their little plots of land. "It's a part of his being. He's a slave to it. To deprive him of it is like tearing his heart from his body. He must not be forced to give it up to join a collective," Carod said.<sup>2</sup> But Carod's advice was not always heeded in Aragon.

The village of Angüés is an example. In *Blood of Spain*, Ronald Fraser quotes a couple from Angüés. Both were staunch CNT supporters: the man said he would give his life to defend the CNT. When the collective was set up, they were happy to get out from under the major landowners who had been grinding them down.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fraser, op cit, p. 371.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Fraser, *ibid*, p. 364.

The first fight between the PSUC and the CNT in Catalonia was over a proposed law to legalize the expropriations of businesses.

This fight took place in October, after the CNT joined the *Generalitat*. According to Andreu Capdevila, the CNT textile worker,

"The PSUC and the *Esquerra* fought extremely hard to reduce the number of firms liable for collectivization while the CNT-FAI held out for the most radical decree possible. The reason the CNT agreed to collectivization was that we could not socialize, as was our aim. The workers had taken over the factories...but the victory was not exclusively the CNT's. We couldn't take over and control the whole economy."<sup>4</sup>

The Communists were most opposed to union socialization of the economy, the process of linking together the entire economy independent of the state. Preserving privately owned businesses was a way of blocking union socialization. The law that was passed only legalized expropriation of firms with 100 or more workers, or firms with 50 to 100 workers if 75 percent of the workers voted to do so. In practice the CNT simply ignored the fact that this was inconsistent with the expropriations of large numbers of smaller businesses they had carried out. The PSUC effort to block moves beyond the market economy was a tactic that strengthened professionals and managers as well as the small business owners.

The PSUC also organized a union of small business owners and shopkeepers, *Gremios y Entidades de Pequeños Comerciantes e Industriales* (Small Commercial and Industrial Businesses — GEPCI). By the spring of 1937 the UGT in Catalonia had mushroomed to 350,000 members (including 18,000 in GEPCI), nearly as large as the 400,000-member CNT. A lot of this growth was based on the PSUC organizing of the middle strata of the population.

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Fraser, op cit, p. 215.

A third reason for growth of the Communist Party during the war was the prestige and influence derived from Soviet arms shipments to the Republican government, and the arrival of the International Brigades during the battle of Madrid in October-November, 1936. At the end of September, 1936, Lluís Companys and Buenaventura Durruti had visited Largo Caballero in Madrid to try to get a commitment of part of Spain's gold reserves to provide resources for the Catalan war industries and militias. Caballero initially agreed to this, but was persuaded to change his mind by Juan Negrín. On September 13<sup>th</sup>, Caballero agreed to let Negrín send the gold reserves wherever he wanted. At this time Spain had the fourth-largest gold reserves in the world, worth about \$800 million (\$11 billion in today's money). The Communists persuaded Negrín to ship 70 percent of the gold reserves to Russia. The Spanish were given verbal assurances that the gold could be re-exported any time they wished. Once the gold arrived in Moscow, however, Stalin commented that "the Spaniards will never see their gold again, just as one cannot see one's own ears."

The transfer of the gold to Russia was extremely damaging to the Spanish economy and the anti-fascist war effort. When word got out that the Spanish peseta was no longer backed by the huge Spanish gold reserve, the value of the peseta fell sharply on the foreign currency market. By December the Spanish currency lost half its value. This caused a big rise in the cost of imports.<sup>5</sup>

Hitler, Mussolini, and the fascist regime in Portugal all provided military support to the Spanish fascist army. In *Arms for Spain* British researcher Gerald Howson documents in great detail the arms shipments provided to both sides in the civil war. Howson shows that the fascist military received far more arms than did the anti-fascist side. The Russians sent far less war material to Spain than has been previously thought. They sent very few new weapons. Most was old, obsolete stuff.

---

<sup>5</sup> Antony Beevor, op cit, p. 124

## Forced Collectivization?

In August, 1937, the Negrín government decreed the abolition of the CNT-controlled Defense Council of Aragon. Army troops under the command of the Communist general Enrique Lister broke up collectives, gave land back to landowners, and arrested 600 CNT members (and killed some of them). To justify the rampage in Aragon, the Communists accused the anarchists of operating a forced collectivization regime.

They claimed they were there to liberate the *campesinos*. The anarchists, for their part, portrayed the collectivization of the agrarian economy of Aragon as the product of local initiative, a movement of emancipation from rural employers and exploitative landlords. There is evidence to support both pictures.

According to Macario Royo, a *campesino* member of the CNT regional committee in Aragon, some element of coercion was inevitable in a revolution. The dominating classes will inevitably oppose the liberation of the working class. But how far should this coercion extend? Communist policy on agriculture had been a source of conflict with sectors of both the CNT and the UGT Land Workers Federation (FNLT).

The main dispute was over the policy towards the large- to medium-sized landowners who didn't flee in reaction to the army *coup*. These people had enough land to hire laborers to work for them. They were the equivalent to the *kulak* class in the Russian revolution of 1917. In most of the anti-fascist zone both the FNLT and CNT usually took the position that landowning *campesinos* should only be allowed to retain as much land as their own family

gle as a conventional war. But guerrilla warfare would have made use of the anti-fascist side's advantage in popular support to tie down large portions of the fascist army.

No appeal was made on a class basis to workers in other countries because the Popular Front strategy did not portray the fight as essentially a struggle for working class power. As George Orwell wrote:

“Once the war had been narrowed down to a ‘war for democracy’ it became impossible to make any large-scale appeal for working class aid abroad...The way in which the working class in the democratic countries could really have helped Spanish comrades was by industrial action —strikes and boycotts. No such thing ever began to happen.”<sup>5</sup>

The main advantage the anti-fascist side had was the revolutionary enthusiasm of the people. Communist maneuvers to gain control of the army, and curtail or destroy worker management of industry, contributed to demoralization.

---

<sup>5</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, p. 69.

It became very difficult for the Spanish anti-fascists to obtain arms at any price due to an embargo implemented by France, Britain and the USA. An entire system of certificates for military goods was set up to track arms shipments throughout the world. The FBI invaded warehouses in Mexico to capture ID numbers of weapons as part of the American participation in the embargo effort.

The New Deal in the USA was initially inclined to allow shipments of arms to the anti-fascist side in Spain. An intensive lobbying campaign organized by the Catholic bishops led to American support for the so-called “Non-Intervention” pact (despite the fact that the Basque Roman Catholic Church supported the anti-fascist side). In May, 1938, Joseph Kennedy led another Catholic lobbying effort that successfully stopped an attempt by liberal congressmen to repeal American participation in the embargo.<sup>6</sup>

Spanish Republican agents had to provide huge bribes anywhere they went in the world to get arms. The “Non-intervention” pact made the Spanish anti-fascists even more dependent on the Soviet Union.

Sending the gold to Russia gave the Soviet regime control over the flow of arms in Spain. For example, late in 1937 Garcia Oliver approached Juan Negrín with a proposal to organize a guerrilla army in the mountains of Andalusia. Most of Andalusia had been overrun by the fascist army in the early weeks of the civil war but it was believed that thousands of anti-fascists were hiding out in the mountains. Garcia Oliver wanted arms and supplies for an organizing group of about 200 who would filter into the mountains. This core group would then organize an army that would harass the fascist forces from behind their lines. Negrín initially agreed to this. But the Soviet representatives refused to authorize the arms because they didn't want a guerrilla army controlled by the anarchists.

---

<sup>6</sup> Antony Beevor, *ibid*, p. 174.

And sending the gold to Russia only made it easier for Stalin to rob the Spaniards. The Soviets faked the prices of arms by creating a special exchange rate, favorable to themselves, for the arms deals. The Russians swindled Spain out of \$50 million on the sale of two airplanes alone. Writes Howson: "Of all the swindles, cheatings, robberies and betrayals the Republicans had to put up with from governments, officials and arms traffickers all over the world, [the]...behaviour by Stalin and the high officials of the Soviet *nomenklatura* is...the most squalid, the most treacherous and the most indefensible."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Howson, *Arms for Spain: The Untold Story of the Spanish Civil War*, p. 151.

who was sympathetic to the Communists. The Communists moved against the Left Socialists, using the police to seize the main newspapers controlled by the Caballero faction of the PSOE.

Negrín approved the repression against the POUM that Caballero refused to do. Soon, Andreu Nin, the POUM leader, was arrested, tortured and assassinated by Communist agents. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, a decree was issued authorizing the Military Investigation Service (*Servicio Inteligencia Militar* — SIM). SIM was a secret political police, riddled with Soviet GPU (military secret police) agents. There were 6,000 SIM agents in Madrid alone.

Bill Herrick was a member of the American Communist Party from New York City who served in the Abraham Lincoln battalion in Spain. In his memoir, Herrick describes how he received angry stares as he walked around Barcelona in his International Brigades uniform in late 1937...and people spit on him. He reports that he was forced by a party boss to witness shootings of young revolutionaries in a SIM prison. He describes the execution of a girl who shouted *Viva la revolución!* before a SIM thug fired a bullet through her brain. The murder of that girl haunted Herrick and led to his eventual break with the American Communist Party after his return to New York City.<sup>4</sup>

The Popular Front strategy was based on the idea of trying to get the capitalist imperialist powers to allow arms shipments to the anti-fascist side in Spain. This was not a very realistic strategy. The main worry of the British elite was Bolshevism, not fascism. That's why the British government in the '30s made endless concessions to Hitler.

The Popular Front strategy led naturally to viewing the struggle as a conventional war. But in conventional military terms, the fascists had the advantage. They had a trained army and access to more arms, via Hitler and Mussolini. The failure to organize guerilla war behind fascist lines derived from this picture of the strug-

---

<sup>4</sup> Bill Herrick, *Jumping the Line*.

but when it came to their own organization they had tremendous discipline.”<sup>3</sup>

On May 6<sup>th</sup> workers began to dismantle the barricades. The PSUC immediately took advantage of the situation to seize the telephone exchange. The CNT leaders seemed to believe that everything would return to the situation that existed before the fighting, now that “our members have shown their teeth.” It didn’t play out that way. A large force of heavily armed paramilitary police were sent to Barcelona to re-impose government authority. Large caches of weapons were seized from the CNT. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, the mutilated bodies of twelve young anarchists were dumped at a cemetery near Ripollet. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, the Italian anarchist Camillo Berneri, a philosophy professor and exile from Italian fascism, was murdered by Communists, along with another Italian anarchist.

At a cabinet meeting of the Popular Front government on May 15<sup>th</sup>, the Communists proposed a motion banning the CNT and the POUM. Caballero responded that this could not be legally done, and that he would not allow it as long as he remained head of the government. The two Communist ministers then walked out of the meeting. When Caballero said, “The Council of Ministers continues,” the social-democrats, Republicans, and Basque Nationalists also walked out, backing up the Communists. Only the three Left Socialists and the four CNT ministers supported Caballero.

The central government and the PCE were the main victors from the May struggle. The CNT was ousted from both the national government and the *Generalitat*.

Soon, the central government deprived the *Generalitat* of control over its local police and eventually repealed the autonomy of Catalonia. Companys and the *Esquerra* were completely marginalized. Caballero was replaced with Juan Negrín — a social-democrat

---

<sup>3</sup> Juan Andrade, quoted in Fraser, op cit, p. 382.

## “The Spanish Kronstadt”

By early 1937 the Communists felt strong enough to make moves towards obtaining hegemony in Spain. The PCE had 230,000 members by March, and the Communist-controlled Unified Socialist Youth had another 250,000 members.<sup>1</sup> During this same period the FAI’s membership grew to about 160,000. Only about 40 percent of the PCE membership was working class.

The Communist intention to move against the worker revolution was made clear in *Pravda* in December, 1936: “As for Catalonia, the purging of the Trotskyists and the Anarcho-Syndicalists has begun, it will be conducted with the same energy with which it was conducted in the USSR.”

Joan Domenech, secretary of the CNT glass workers union, had been in charge of food supply in the *Generalitat* government. On January 7<sup>th</sup>, the CNT-controlled supply organization was dissolved by orders of the *Generalitat*. Responsibility for food was transferred from Domenech to the PSUC. The PSUC put the free market and local businesses in charge — a move that strengthened GEPCI. The result was a big increase in food prices, due to hoarding and shortages. In the Communist press, the collectives were blamed.

On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, the UGT of Catalonia, now controlled by the Communists, held a “congress” of landowning farmers in Catalonia. This was basically a propaganda stunt against the agricultural collectives. Agitation by the Communists led to an armed uprising by farmers in Tarragona province, resulting in a nasty clash

---

<sup>1</sup> Report by André Marty to Soviet authorities, March 1937, translated in Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov, op cit, p. 145.

with the *asaltos* and the Control Patrols (militia police formed after July 19<sup>th</sup> 1936). The conflict escalated when Rodriguez Salas, a new pro-Communist chief of police, began moves to disarm civilians in Barcelona — an attack on the CNT neighborhood defense groups. These conflicts led to a *Generalitat* decree dissolving the Control Patrols on March 4<sup>th</sup>.

In November, 1936, when the CNT joined the Popular Front government, Garcia Oliver became minister of justice. This put him in charge of the Spanish prison system. In October a thousand right-wing prisoners in Madrid jails had been taken by prison guards to the edge of town and executed, without authorization. To prevent abuses of this sort, Garcia Oliver appointed an anarchist, Melchor Rodriguez, head of prisons in Madrid. Meanwhile, the Communists had gained control of the revolutionary government in Madrid, the Madrid Defense Junta. On April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1937, Rodriguez revealed that a secret Communist prison had been discovered in Madrid. The nephew of a high official in the PSOE was being detained in that prison, and a number of Socialists had been tortured there. This scandal led the Caballero government to dissolve the Madrid Defense Junta. Not long after this, the PCE changed its tune about Caballero. In early 1936 the Communist press had touted Caballero as the “Spanish Lenin.” By the spring of 1937 they were describing him as a senile old fool.

On April 25<sup>th</sup>, a PSUC activist, Roldán Cortada, a former *treintista*, was assassinated in Bajo Llobregat — an anarchist stronghold. A leading anarchist activist in Bajo Llobregat was accused but no proof was provided. The funeral of Cortada was the occasion for a massive street demonstration — a Communist show of force.

In an atmosphere of increasing tension, the conflict between the Communists and CNT exploded on May 3<sup>rd</sup> when a large force of Communist-controlled police attacked the worker-controlled telephone exchange building in Barcelona, with coordinated assaults on telephone exchanges elsewhere. The telephone system in Spain was being run by a CNT-controlled worker federation. CNT work-

ers had been listening in on calls of government officials in order to keep tabs on them. This was used by the Communists as a pretext for trying to seize the telephone system. The PSUC was not against the practice of listening in on calls, however. As a close associate of PSUC leader Juan Comorera later recalled: “Of course, had the PSUC been in a position to listen in on telephone conversations, it would have done so also. The party always wanted to be well-informed.”<sup>2</sup> It was a question of power.

Word of the attack on the telephone exchange spread rapidly. Within hours the CNT neighborhood defense committees went into action against the Communist-controlled police and began building barricades. The POUM and the Libertarian Youth joined the fray and soon armed worker groups were in control of most of the city and the suburbs. A general strike spread throughout the Barcelona area. The government forces retained control only in some parts of the central area.

This whole fight was a fairly spontaneous reaction of the working class against an armed power play by the Communists. The regional and national committees of the CNT tried to negotiate an end to the fighting, and prohibited CNT army units from intervening. On May 4<sup>th</sup> the CNT appealed via loudspeakers and the union radio for an end to fighting and for everyone to return to work. Both Federica Montseny and Garcia Oliver, anarchist ministers in the national government, appealed over the radio for an end to the fighting. A member of the POUM described what happened at a barricade in reaction to Montseny’s radio speech:

“The CNT militants were so furious they pulled out their pistols and shot the radio. It sounds incredible but it happened in front of my eyes. They were absolutely furious, and yet they obeyed. They might be anarchists,

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Fraser, *op cit*, pp. 377–378.