

Anniversary of Spanish revolution

What lessons?

The Spanish revolution in 1936 was tragically defeated and helped open the doors to facism in Europe. Yet, writes **Shawn Hattingh**, this significant revolution showed exciting possibilities for worker self management in a stateless society.

July 19 marks the 75th anniversary of one of the most remarkable events in history: the Spanish revolution. People today seeking a democratic, socialist and egalitarian society can draw lessons from the successes and failures of this revolution. It demonstrated that an alternative to state-led 'socialism' known as anarchism/syndicalism is achievable.

During its duration, social relations changed: bosses were fired, workers practised direct democracy, greater gender equality was won and socialism-from-below started to become a reality. Leon Trotsky's (a leader of Russian revolution) secretary, Andreas Nin, stated that for as long as it lasted, the changes achieved by workers and peasants during the Spanish revolution went much deeper than the Russian revolution.

For these achievements alone, the Spanish revolution should be celebrated. But we also need to bear in mind the other lessons: without clear tactics, and without effectively carrying these out, revolutions will fail.

REVOLUTION BEGINS

Spain in 1936 was marked by massive inequalities, high unemployment, extensive penetration by foreign companies

seeking cheap labour, and a state riddled with corruption. Prior to July 1936, it was on a knife's edge. Many expected a revolution to break out.

Members of the largest trade union, the anarchist-syndicalist National Confederation of Labour (CNT), had been actively working towards it through general strikes. The powerful anarchist/syndicalist movement had a vast network of community and union activists. In other words, anarchists had built a counter-power, which the elite found extremely threatening.

Right-wing forces were also preparing for a showdown. On 19 July the rightwing launched a military coup under the fascist General Franco to smash the expected revolution. The Popular Front regime which was in power headed by social democrats and liberals lacked direction so when the coup occurred it failed to resist it.

By contrast, the CNT was prepared. In Barcelona, CNT members seized 30 000 rifles from the military, and armed the workers. When the coup reached Barcelona, CNT members led the masses, including members of the social democratic UGT union, in building barricades and crushing the fascist troops. With news that the coup was defeated in

Barcelona, workers and peasants across Spain took hope. They went on the offensive, defeating the coup in two-thirds of the country.

COLLECTIVISATION

For the CNT, democracy did not reside in parliamentary government; it belonged in everyday life. With the roll-back of the coup, workers began seizing factories throughout the cities, collectivising them.

In Barcelona alone, over 3 000 factories were seized, and placed under direct self-management, based on mass assemblies and mandated committees.

Many of the collectivised industries were vast, such as the textile industry with 250 000 workers and often efficiency and quality improved. The myth that workers could not run society without the state, or ruling elite, was shattered.

In the countryside, farm-workers and peasants collectivised land. Over 15 million acres was expropriated from capitalist farmers and over 2 000 self-managed rural collectives were established, in which seven million people participated. Again, assemblies and committees based on direct democracy and recallable delegates undertook the planning of production and distribution.

A number of regional councils comprising delegates from participating collectives were created to facilitate the transfer of goods and services between industries, and between the countryside and the cities.

In the major cities, where worker self-management was being practised, workers' committees had also emerged from the union structures, and the CNT provided a means to link the industries.

However, full-scale national economic coordination from below was never achieved. This meant that a degree of competition between self-managed firms sometimes continued, and the market was never eradicated. With time these problems may have been addressed democratically, but this was not to be.

WOMEN'S ADVANCES

Women in Spain suffered extreme oppression before the revolution. When the revolution erupted, they achieved an unprecedented degree of emancipation.

Church-controlled marriage was replaced by relationships based on free consent. For the first time, divorce, abortion and contraception were made available. *Mujeres Libres* ('Free Women'), an anarchist women's organisation, rolled out education covering everything from literacy to sexual health to anarchism. This was critical as women had traditionally been denied education.

Women also entered industry on a massive scale. They participated in assemblies and neighbourhood bodies and fought in the anarchist militias against the fascists.

REVOLUTIONARY PLANS

In short, in the middle of 1936 a social revolution had taken place that put the peasants and working class in control of large sections of the military, the economy and daily life. Tragic mistakes were, however, made.

The revolution stopped half-way despite the CNT had preparing for it. The 1936 congress of the Anarchist Federation of Iberia (FAI) had called for the state and capitalism to be smashed and replaced with collectivisation, defended by a people's militia.

Likewise, the CNT's May congress insisted on the creation of a national Economic Council of delegates to plan the economy and to replace the market and the state with direct democracy. This was matched by a national Defence Council to defend the revolution and coordinate the militias.

The importance of an alliance with the UGT, the second largest union federation, was recognised and steps were taken to build a Workers' Alliance with the UGT rank-and-file. (The UGT leaders were part of the Popular Front, and anti-anarchist.)

CNT policy also proposed independence for Morocco, Spain's colony. This was part of the CNT/FAI's larger commitment to spreading revolution globally. So they had detailed plans on the eve of July to take a revolution forward but they were never put into full practice.

In provinces like Catalonia and Aragon, state power had largely collapsed after the defeat of the coup. Decisive action could have demolished the remnants. In this vacuum, the Popular Front government approached the CNT and FAI to join forces. It also invited them to join an Anti-Fascist Militia Committee (AFMC) to coordinate the military effort and defeat the remaining fascist forces.

A large section of the CNT, along with the Anarchist Youth Movement, argued against joining the AFMC. They said that the CNT/FAI programme to replace capitalism and the state with socialism must be carried out together with Morocco's independence.

The key figure in this group was CNT/FAI militant, Buenaventura Durruti, who had been involved



in CNT/FAI insurrections in the early 1930s. Countering this was a group led by Federica Montseny and Diego Abad de Santillan. They stressed that they agreed with the CNT/FAI programme but argued that the immediate task was not revolution, but crushing Franco's forces. This required cooperation with the Popular Front.

They further argued that if the CNT smashed the state, it would smash the Popular Front and the war effort against the fascists. They added that the revolution was isolated internationally, and had little chance of success if it had to fight both Franco and the Popular Front. The Montseny/de Santillan faction won.

On entry into the AFMC, the CNT had a minority status despite its mass power. Most seats were held by the Popular Front parties: liberals, nationalists, social democrats and communists. The price of the CNT/FAI joining was to halt the revolution, which was opposed by the Popular Front. Also Moroccan independence was put on hold in order not to alienate imperialist Britain and France which the Popular Front viewed as possible allies.



The Communists, too, wanted to ensure that the Soviet Union could build an alliance with Britain and France against Nazi Germany and so a revolution was a threat.

The AFMC's proposals were controversial. They contradicted the positions of the CNT/FAI. The slippery road of joining the Popular Front eventually led to four CNT figures, among them Montseny and de Santillan, becoming government ministers. Increasingly they identified with state policy and began subverting the democratic processes within the CNT/FAI.

The anarchist argument that state power corrupts even the most radical people and derails rather than delivers real socialism was proved true by the anarchist ministers.

DERAILED REVOLUTION

Entry into the AFMC and Popular Front derailed the FAI/CNT programme. It also enabled the Spanish state to rebuild its power, which was then wielded against worker self-management often viewed by Popular Front leaders as a greater threat than the fascists.

With their near complete control of the state, the social democrats and Communists starved the anarchist militias

of weapons. Defeats were then blamed on the militias. This was used as a way to push for a conventional hierarchical army and destruction of democratic militias.

In May 1937, the Popular Front moved against the industrial collectives, starting with a communist attack on the Barcelona telephone exchange. When the workers fought back, Montseny and de Santillan called on the CNT militants to lay down their weapons. Once they did so, however, the Communists arrested, murdered and tortured thousands of anarchists and sympathetic leftists.

Later that year, the Council of Aragon was abolished, and armed attacks were organised on rural collectives. Worker self-management and the state proved to be incompatible.

Important opposition to the participation in the Popular Front developed in the CNT/FAI. A key grouping was the 'Friends of Durruti,' which sought to revive the original FAI/CNT positions: complete socialisation, a National Defence Council and internationalising the revolution. However, the power of the CNT was seriously undermined by growing repression and the emergence of a reformist faction tied to the anarchist ministers.

The 'Friends' ultimately were not successful and by late 1938 the revolution was largely dead.

Meanwhile, the Popular Front was a military disaster. It committed one military blunder after another. Attacks on the collectives undermined production, as well as enthusiasm for the anti-Franco struggle. Refusal to grant Moroccan independence provided Franco with a base in North Africa.

Meanwhile, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy provided Franco with weapons and troops. Soon Franco took power introducing mass executions and terror.

CONCLUSION

The Spanish revolution marks the greatest attempt to build socialism-from-below.

In the first days of the revolution the FAI/CNT played an heroic role and the vision and goals of anarchism were vindicated. In embarking upon widespread self-management, workers and peasants proved they could run society without a state or ruling elite.

Nonetheless, the CNT/FAI was also guilty of major blunders, which ultimately cost the revolution. Victory for the revolution may not have been assured if the CNT/FAI had smashed the state in July 1936. However, with it entering into an alliance with the state and other class enemies in the form of the Communists, social democrats and liberals, a defeat was guaranteed.

The Spanish experience makes it evident that clear tactics are needed in any revolution. These tactics need to be in line with anarchist aims and principles. Joining the government, and forming an alliance with the ruling class, is not compatible with a genuine revolution.

Rather, the key is to rely on the mass of the people, on self-governance and self-management, on uniting the popular classes, on internationalism and on firm support for all progressive struggles. Radical participatory democracy is the means and the aims of an anarchist/syndicalist (radical union) revolution. It is not compatible with the state, parliamentary politics and cross-class alliances. These are the lessons of the most profound revolution of the 20th century. ¹⁸

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