

Lessons of Spain

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The contradictions, the crises and the catastrophes of modern capitalism brought forth a socialist revolutionary movement of the proletarian masses whose purpose is the materialization of *social justice*. In this struggle what is the special attitude of the libertarian revolutionists?

They oppose historical fatalism and emphasize their creative will to struggle towards the creation of a new social order; they are opposed to the thought, born out of exhausted slave mentality, that equality can be realized by force from above. Social justice can only come alive in freedom, and freedom can be deserved and obtained only if it is "conquered anew every day." The libertarian revolutionists therefore consider freedom not only as an end, but also as a means; they propagate direct action in all its forms and warn against amalgamation of revolutionary aims with capitalist interests and existing political factors.

But the libertarian idea is no "ism" deriving from a salvationist doctrine "revealed" by some great personality. Anarchism gives no rules of conduct appropriate for all times—its only rule is the will to libertarian activity; creative construction from below; the resistance against dictatorship, against regimentation, against sapping the initiative of the people.

Neither is Revolutionary Syndicalism, in which many Anarchists see one of the most important means in the struggle for liberty, a mechanical recipe for the changing of human society. It is mainly a principle of the movement, of the struggle, a definite tendency of reconstruction. In no book is this formula laid down.

Proudhon and Bakunin, ardent lovers of freedom, and great haters of dictatorship, fought for various aspirations and experiments; they united with and parted from men of real or alleged similarity of opinions. They revised occasionally their own theories. They started from the beginning again, they learned continuously,

and occasionally even contradicted themselves. They were men bound by formulas as little as were Gustav Landauer and Erich Muhsam in the Bavarian Revolution of 1919. They were libertarian revolutionists, they wanted only one thing, to be with the people and to try to teach them something of their libertarian ideal.

The struggle of the CNT-FAI, * 1936-1939, was also an attempt born of libertarian will and was defeated in the struggle against a world of internal and external enemies due to the passivity of the proletarian masses of Europe and the absence of a strong libertarian movement in non-Spanish countries.

* CNT – The Spanish anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Labor. FAI – The Iberian Anarchist Federation

It is not our aim to determine whether the revolutionists of the CNT and the FAI remained faithful to the tenets of some ready made social recipes in the difficult struggle, in which they took upon themselves so much responsibility in their complicated social, political labors during the last three years. Popular movements, historical cataclysms, which put large masses in action are determined by such a great number of super-individual and objective factors that they have something of the power of forces of nature. A movement like that of the Spanish anti-Fascist people of 1936-1939 must be understood from its conditions and underlying factors. These conditions were external (the victorious progress of Fascism in other countries and the defeatist attitude of the labor movement in all Europe) and internal (the co-existence of two numerically more or less equally strong labor organizations, the CNT and the UGT; the paucity of arms and the inevitable dependence on some foreign state for armaments). When one recognizes these underlying factors one must admit that the general line or the attitude of the CNT-FAI was correct, because no other would have been possible: renouncing of immediate realization of the Anarchist ideals; the attempt at understanding with the other Socialist trade union tendency; attempt at the creation and maintenance of an anti-Fascist unity with other political groups and even among various social classes.

In this connection it is certainly necessary to point out errors of omission and commission. The CNT-FAI unfortunately did not know Bolshevism as well as we foreign comrades. The CNT was less well organized than it should have been and hence the weakness it evidenced in relations with other anti-fascist groups and social forces. It was unfortunately too credulous and idealistic in relations with its allies. But this attitude does not dishonor it. Nevertheless, that which the CNT-FAI has done will prove to be a creative force in the subsequent history of social struggles if we understand the positive core of the Spanish libertarian struggle and learn from it. Not only the magnificent impulse of the direct action of July 19, 1936 but also the political tendency of cooperation with other elements, the work of Social Reconstruction of 1936-1939, are all rich teachings and have a great libertarian content.

In short the lessons from Spain can be summed up as follows:

1) Direct action is superior to parliamentary action. The July 19th was possible not in the country of the "so far advanced" Marxist German labor movement but in Spain inspired by Anarcho-Syndicalism.

2) Taking over of the means of production by the workers and their economic organizations is the real meaning of every struggle against Fascism and at the same time their only guarantee of an advance in the direction of Socialism and freedom. All attempts at a Socialism by decrees, be it within bourgeois society or under "revolutionary party dictatorship" have failed so far as shown by Weimar Germany, Stalin-Russia, etc.

3). The economic labor organization is as a means of struggle and social reconstruction superior over the political party as direct action is superior to parliamentary action. The struggle against Fascism, the forming of militias and the popular army, and the continuation and reorganization of production became possible only because there was in Spain a libertarian, revolutionary, constructive labor movement. The political parties played in these events only a parasitic role.

The lessons of the Spanish struggles are well recognized and in order to bring those lessons across to the masses of workers, peasants and intellectuals it is necessary to carry on an educational campaign dealing with the actual basis and aims of the Spanish anti-Fascist movement. Such a campaign should also be in the nature of propaganda for a new, libertarian Socialism and for the rebirth of the labor movement in the spirit of direct action. We need not be ashamed to admit that the Spanish struggle also brought certain insights to the Anarchist and the Revolutionary Syndicalist movement which must be taken account of in our struggle for the regeneration of the labor movement. I shall try here briefly to outline some of these lessons.

1) The Libertarian movement must learn to think "politically," that is it has to adapt its daily demands to the level of the understanding of the masses, to what the masses themselves might practically want to achieve within the framework of given national and international relationships. Such partial demands and achievements of a social as well as political nature amply repay the revolutionary energies spent; the criterion of the worth of such demands lies only in their libertarian content, in the releasing of the active initiative of the people themselves, the ceaseless proclaiming of "the social revolution as the only cure" can only dull the fighting vigor of the masses, and very often it is only an excuse for sectarian isolation and lack of activity.

2) The formula of class struggle must be supplemented by the realization that Socialism if it does not want to degenerate into a brutal dictatorship, is possible only as an alliance between workers, working peasants, and the working middle strata of the city as well as intellectuals. The CNT was in this respect badly pre-

pared and therefore it suffered quite a number of defeats, but the course it followed was correct. The great obstacle was that the anti-proletarian instinct of the petty-bourgeoisie was mobilized by Moscow and directed against the CNT. But in spite of that some cooperation with various social layers is necessary even now in the libertarian struggle, and more so on the morrow in socialist reconstruction. The CNT never collaborated with the "bourgeoisie;" the big bourgeoisie was expropriated and it disappeared. It stands to reason of course that cooperation between workers and the middle classes does not mean that we have to fall upon the neck of the petty-bourgeois. The workers have to be alert, vigilant, astute. But anyone who wants to solve everything by the method of a mere struggle of the industrial proletariat is either a utopian or a partisan of dictatorship. It is pure nonsense to substitute the realization of freedom with the extermination of all other currents within the social movement. This is the line taken by some of our comrades.

The CNT-FAI made certain mistakes. Their social and political positions left much to be desired; their work abroad should have leaned much stronger upon the experience of foreign libertarian movements: all that is true. But the CNT-FAI did not go back upon their basic ideas, only the tactical means used by them were not sufficiently thought out because they had to face a situation which had not been foreseen. The CNT-FAI have a great advantage over the other radical movements: they are not sectarian but are as one with the great mass of the people whose needs and movements they express directly. Notwithstanding many weaknesses and shortcomings of the libertarian tactics in Spain, the proletariat of the world and the forces of all countries striving for freedom and social emancipation have much more to learn from such tactics than ground for criticism. And this goes for us too.

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