

Workers' Liberty 3/6: The betrayal of the Spanish Revolution

The Spanish Revolution and the Civil War, 1936-9 - A "Diary" of Events, by Leon Trotsky

Though Leon Trotsky's writings on Spain fill a large volume, he wrote no concise overview of the Spanish revolution. Our "diary" is culled from the commentaries he produced all through the last decade of his life: the last item here is dated 20 August 1940, the day Trotsky was assassinated.

25 May, 1930

The Primo de Rivera dictatorship has fallen without a revolution, from internal exhaustion. In the beginning, in other words, the question was decided by the sickness of the old society and not by the revolutionary forces of a new society...

The workers' struggle must be closely linked to all the questions that flow from the national crisis. The fact that the workers demonstrated with the students is the first step, though still an insufficient and hesitant one, on the proletarian vanguard's road of struggle toward revolutionary hegemony.

Taking this road presupposes that the communists will struggle resolutely, audaciously, and energetically for democratic slogans. Not to understand this would be to commit the greatest sectarian mistake. At the present stage of the revolution, the proletariat distinguishes itself in the field of political slogans from all the "leftist" petty-bourgeois groupings not by rejecting democracy (as the anarchists and syndicalists do) but by struggling resolutely and openly for it, at the same time mercilessly denouncing the hesitations of the petty bourgeoisie.

By advancing democratic slogans, the proletariat is not in any way suggesting that Spain is heading toward a bourgeois revolution. Only barren pedants full of pat, ready-made formulas could pose the question this way. Spain has left the stage of bourgeois revolution far behind.

If the revolutionary crisis is transformed into a revolution, it will inevitably pass beyond bourgeois limits, and in the event of victory the power will have to come into the hands of the proletariat. But in this epoch, the proletariat can lead the revolution — that is, group the broadest masses of the workers and the oppressed around itself and become their leader — only on the condition that it now unreservedly puts forth all the democratic demands, in conjunction with its own class demands...

The peasantry will inevitably link the slogan of political democracy with the slogan of radical redistribution of the land. The proletariat will openly support both demands. At the proper time, the communists will explain to the proletarian vanguard the road by which these demands can be achieved, thus sowing the seeds for the future soviet system.

Even on national questions, the proletariat defends the democratic slogans to the hilt, declaring that

it is ready to support by revolutionary means the right of different national groups to self-determination, even to the point of separation.

But does the proletarian vanguard itself raise the slogan of secession of Catalonia? If it is the will of the majority, yes; but how can this will be expressed? Obviously, by means of a free plebiscite, or an assembly of Catalan representatives, or by the parties that are clearly supported by the Catalan masses, or even by a Catalan national revolt. Again we see, let us note in passing, what reactionary pedantry it would be for the proletariat to renounce democratic slogans. Meanwhile, as long as the national minority has not expressed its will, the proletariat itself will not adopt the slogan of separation, but it pledges openly, in advance, its complete and sincere support to this slogan in the event that it should express the will of Catalonia...

By supporting all really democratic and revolutionary movements of the popular masses, the communist vanguard will be leading an uncompromising struggle against the so-called republican bourgeoisie, unmasking its double-dealing, its treachery, and its reactionary character, and resisting its attempts to subject the toiling masses to its influence.

The communists never relinquish their freedom of political action under any conditions. It must not be forgotten that during a revolution temptations of this sort are very great: the tragic history of the Chinese revolution is irrefutable testimony to this. But while safeguarding the full independence of their organisation and their propaganda, the communists nonetheless practice, in the broadest fashion, the policy of the united front, for which the revolution offers a vast field.

21 November, 1930

Spain may go through the same cycle as Italy did, beginning with 1918-1919: ferment, strikes, a general strike, the seizure of the factories, the lack of leadership, the decline of the movement, the growth of fascism, and of a counter-revolutionary dictatorship?

24 January, 1931

The appearance of the Spanish proletariat on the historic arena radically changes the situation and opens up new prospects. In order to grasp this properly, it must first be understood that the establishment of the economic dominance of the big bourgeoisie and the growth of the proletariat's political significance definitely prevent the petty bourgeoisie from occupying a leading position in the political life of the country. The question of whether the present revolutionary convulsions can produce a genuine revolution, capable of reconstructing the very basis of national life, is consequently reduced to whether the Spanish proletariat is capable of taking the leadership of the national life into its hands. There is no other claimant to this role in the Spanish nation. Moreover, the historic experience of Russia succeeded in showing with sufficient clarity the specific gravity of the proletariat, united by big industry in a country with a backward agriculture and enmeshed in a net of semi-feudal relations...

To aim the weapon of the revolution against the remnants of the Spanish Middle Ages means to aim

it against the very roots of bourgeois rule...

Only pedants can see contradictions in the combination of democratic slogans with transitional and purely socialist slogans. Such a combined program, reflecting the contradictory construction of historic society, flows inevitably from the diversity of problems inherited from the past. To reduce all the contradictions and all the tasks of one lowest common denominator — the dictatorship of the proletariat — is a necessary but altogether insufficient, operation. Even if one should run ahead and assume that the proletarian vanguard has grasped the idea that only the dictatorship of the proletariat can save Spain from further decay, the preparatory problem would nevertheless remain in full force: to weld around the vanguard the heterogeneous sections of the working class and the still more heterogeneous masses of village toilers. To contrast the bare slogan of the dictatorship of the proletariat to the historically determined tasks that are now impelling the masses towards the road of insurrection would be to replace the Marxist conception of social revolution with Bakunin's. This would be the surest way to ruin the revolution.

Needless to say, democratic slogans under no circumstances have as their object drawing the proletariat closer to the republican bourgeoisie. On the contrary, they create the basis for a victorious struggle against the leftist bourgeoisie, making it possible to disclose its anti-democratic character at every step. The more courageously, resolutely, and implacably the proletarian vanguard fights for democratic slogans, the sooner it will win over the masses and undermine the support for the bourgeois republicans and socialist reformists. The more quickly their best elements join us, the sooner the democratic republic will be identified in the mind of the masses with the workers' republic...

In reality, in spite of the mighty sweep of the struggle, the subjective factors of the revolution — the party, the mass organisations, the slogans — are extraordinarily behind the tasks of the movement, and it is this backwardness that constitutes the main danger today.

The semi-spontaneous spread of strikes, which have brought victims and defeats or have ended with no gains, is an absolutely unavoidable stage of the revolution, the stage of the awakening of the masses, the mobilisation, and their entry into struggle. For it is not the creams of the workers who take part in the movement, but the masses as a whole. Not only do factory workers strike, but also artisans, chauffeurs, and bakers, construction, irrigation, and, finally, agricultural workers. The veterans stretch their limbs, the new recruits learn. Through the medium of these strikes, the class begins to feel itself a class.

However, the spontaneity — which at the present stage constitutes the strength of the movement — may in the future become the source of weakness. To assume that the movement can continue to be left without a clear programme, without its own leadership, would mean to assume a perspective of hopelessness. For the question involved it is nothing less than the seizure of power. Even the stormiest strikes do not solve this problem — not to speak of the ones that are broken. If the proletariat were not to feel in the process of the struggle during the coming months that its tasks and methods are becoming clearer to itself, that its ranks are becoming consolidated and strengthened, then a decomposition would set in within its own ranks...

Anarcho-syndicalism disarms the proletariat by its lack of a revolutionary program and its failure to understand the role of the party. The anarchists “deny” politics until it seizes them by the throat; then they prepare the ground for the politics of the enemy class...

Practical agreements with revolutionary syndicalists are inevitable in the course of the revolution. These agreements we will loyally fulfil. But it would be truly fatal to introduce into these agreements elements of duplicity, concealment, and deceit. Even in those days and hours when the communist workers have to fight side by side with the syndicalist workers, there must be no destruction of the principled disagreements, no concealment of differences, nor any weakening of the criticism of the wrong principled position of the ally. Only under this condition will the progressive development of the revolution be secured...

For a successful solution of all these tasks, three conditions are required: a party; once more a party; again a party!

July 1936

For the second time in five years, the coalition of the labour parties with the radical bourgeoisie has brought the revolution to the edge of the abyss. Incapable of solving a single one of the tasks posed by the revolution, since all these tasks boil down to one, namely, the crushing of the bourgeoisie, the Popular Front renders the existence of the bourgeois regime impossible and thereby provokes the fascist coup d'état. By lulling the workers and peasants with parliamentary illusions, by paralysing their will to struggle, the Popular Front creates the favourable conditions for the victory of fascism. The policy of coalition with the bourgeoisie must be paid for by the proletariat with years of new torments and sacrifice, if not by decades of fascist terror.

27 July, 1936

The Popular Front government in Spain was not a government, but simply a ministry. The real government resided in the General Staff, in the banks, etc. The French Radicals were authorised to form an alliance with the workers on condition that they did not touch the officer corps. But as the workers continue to press their demands, the entire state machine will ultimately come down upon their heads. The SAPists consider the Popular Front an enrichment of proletarian tactics. If they cannot see its class character, that is because they are good for nothing. The Radicals are seen only as the right wing of the Popular Front; in reality they are there to represent the ruling class, and it is through them that finance capital maintains its rule, both within the Popular Front and over the proletariat...

Today we can also grasp more clearly the crime committed at the beginning of this year by the POUM leaders Maurin and Nin. Any thinking worker can and will ask these people: “Did you foresee nothing? How could you have signed the Popular Front program and have us put our confidence in Azaña and his associates, instead of instilling in us the greatest distrust in the radical bourgeoisie? Now we must pay for your errors with our blood.” The workers must feel particular anger towards Nin and his friends because they belonged to a tendency that a few years ago, had provided a precise analysis of Popular Front politics, concretising and clarifying it at each stage.

And Nin cannot invoke ignorance as his excuse — a wretched excuse for any leader — because he ought to have at least read the documents he once signed.

30 July, 1936

Some people (for example, Rosmer) consider my sharp critique of Nin's policies to be sectarian. If it is sectarianism, then all of Marxism is only sectarianism, since it is the doctrine of the class struggle and not of class collaboration. The present events in Spain in particular show how criminal was Nin's rapprochement with Azaña: the Spanish workers will now pay with thousands of lives for the reactionary cowardice of the Popular Front, which has continued to support with the people's money an army commanded by the executioners of the proletariat. Here it is a question, my dear Victor Serge, not of splitting hairs, but of the very essence of revolutionary socialism. If Nin today were to pull himself together and realise how discredited he is in the eyes of the workers, if he should draw all the necessary conclusions, then we would help him as a comrade; but we cannot permit the spirit of chumminess in politics.

30 July, 1936

Even now, in the midst of civil war, the Popular Front government does everything in its power to make victory doubly difficult. A civil war is waged, as everybody knows, not only with military but also with political weapons. From a purely military point of view, the Spanish revolution is much weaker than its enemy. Its strength lies in its ability to rouse the greater masses to action. It can even take the army away from its reactionary officers. To accomplish this, it is only necessary to seriously and courageously advance the program of the socialist revolution.

It is necessary to proclaim that, from now on, the land, factories, and shops will pass from the hands of the capitalists into the hands of the people. It is necessary to move at once toward the realisation of this program in those provinces where the workers are in power. The fascist army could not resist the influence of such a program for twenty-four hours; the soldiers would tie their officers hand and foot and turn them over to the nearest headquarters of the workers' militia. But the bourgeois ministers cannot accept such a programme. Curbing the social revolution, they compel the workers and peasants to spill ten times as much of their own blood in the civil war. And to crown everything, these gentlemen expect to disarm the workers again after the victory and to force them to respect the sacred laws of private property. Such is the true essence of the policy of the Popular Front. Everything else is pure humbug, phrases and lies!...

The workers' party that enters into a political alliance with the radical bourgeoisie by that fact alone renounces the struggle against capitalist militarism. Bourgeois domination, that is to say, the maintenance of private property in the means of production, is inconceivable without the support of the armed forces for the exploiters. The officers' corps represents the guard of capital. Without this guard, the bourgeoisie could not maintain itself for a single day. The selection of the individuals, their education and training, make the officers as a distinctive group uncompromising enemies of socialism. Isolated exceptions change nothing. That is how things stand in all bourgeois countries. The danger lies not in the military braggarts and demagogues who openly appear as fascists; incomparably more menacing is the fact that at the approach of the proletarian revolution the

officers' corp becomes the executioner of the proletariat.

To eliminate four or five hundred reactionary agitators from the army means to leave everything basically as it was before. The officers' corps, in which is concentrated the centuries-old tradition of enslaving the people, must be dissolved, broken, crushed in its entirety, root and branch. The troops in the barracks commanded by the officers' caste must be replaced by the people's militia, that is the democratic organisation of the armed workers and peasants. There is no other solution. But such an army is incompatible with the domination of exploiters big and small. Can the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois republicans agree to such a measure? Not at all. The Popular Front government, that is to say, the government of the coalition of the workers with the bourgeoisie, is in its very essence a government of capitulation to the bureaucracy and the officers. Such is the great lesson of the events in Spain, now being paid for with thousands of human lives.

But here we are interrupted by the exclamation, "How can one dissolve the officers' corps? Doesn't this mean destroying the army and leaving the country disarmed in the face of fascism? Hitler and Mussolini are only waiting for that!" All these arguments are old and familiar. That's how the Cadets, the Social Revolutionaries, and the Russian Mensheviks reasoned in 1917, and that's how the leaders of the Spanish Popular Front reasoned. The Spanish workers half-believed these rationalisations until they were convinced by experience that the nearest fascist enemy was to be found in the Spanish fascist army. Not for nothing did our old friend Karl Liebknecht teach: "The main enemy is in our own country!"

August 16, 1936

The question most on my mind concerns relations between the POUM and the syndicalists. It seems to me it would be extremely dangerous to let oneself be guided exclusively or even primarily by doctrinal considerations. At all costs, it is necessary to improve relations with the syndicalists, despite all their prejudices. The common enemy must be defeated. The confidence of the best syndicalists must be won in the course of the struggle. Before October we made every effort to work together with the purest anarchists.

The Kerensky government often tried to use the Bolsheviks against the anarchists. Lenin resolutely opposed this. In that situation, he said, one anarchist militant was worth more than a hundred hesitating Mensheviks. During the civil war the greatest danger is lack of decisiveness, a spirit of equivocation, in a word — Menshevism.

25 February, 1937

One does not demonstrate one's friendship for a revolutionary organisation in a difficult situation by closing one's eyes to its mistakes and the dangers arising from them. The situation in Spain can be saved only by an energetic, radical, and heroic comeback of the left wing of the proletariat; thus an immediate regroupment is necessary. It is necessary to open up an implacable campaign against the bloc with the bourgeoisie, and for a socialist program. It is necessary to denounce Stalinist, Socialist and anarchist leaders precisely because of their bloc with the bourgeoisie. It is not a question of articles more or less confined to the columns of [the POUM journal] *La Batalla*. No. It is a question

of marshalling the masses against their leaders, who are leading the revolution to complete destruction.

The policy of the POUM leadership is a policy of adaptation, expectation, hesitation, that is to say, the most dangerous of all policies during civil war, which is uncompromising. Better to have in the POUM 10,000 comrades ready to mobilise the masses against treason than 40,000 who suffer the policies of others instead of carrying out their own. The 40,000 members of the POUM (if the figure is accurate) cannot by themselves assure the victory of the proletariat if their policy remains hesitant. But 20,000, or even 10,000, with a clear, decisive, aggressive policy, can win the masses in a short time, just as the Bolsheviks won the mass in eight months.

20 March, 1937

The different intermediate groups (between the Stalinist Communist International and Trotskyist), terrified by their own inconsistency, seek support at the last minute from the Spanish revolution. All the leaders of the ILP and SAP, in supporting Nin against us, have done everything they could do to hamper victory in Spain. They think now they can hide their definitive bankruptcy in the shadow of the heroic Spanish and Catalan proletariat. In vain. Victory is possible only by the road that we have indicated time and again. Either Nin, Andrade, Gorkin must change their policy radically, that is to say, change from the path of Martov to that of Lenin, or they will lead the POUM to a split and perhaps even to a terrible defeat. Revolutionary words (editorials, solemn discourses, etc.) do not advance the revolution a step. The struggle of the POUMist workers is magnificent, but without resolute leadership it cannot bring victory. It is a question of rousing the masses with supreme courage against the traitorous leaders. There is the beginning of wisdom.

Break with the phantom bourgeoisie who stay in the Popular Front only to prevent the masses from making their own revolution. That is the first order of the day. Rouse the anarchists, Stalinists, and Socialists against their leaders, who do not want to break with the bourgeois ministers, those scarecrows protecting private property. That is the second step. Without that, everything else is verbiage, prattle and lies. They have wasted five years for Leninist policy. I am not sure that they still have five months or five weeks to try to correct the errors committed.

23 March, 1937

For six years, Nin has made nothing but mistakes. He has flirted with ideas and eluded difficulties. Instead of battle, he has substituted petty combinations. He has impeded the creation of a revolutionary party in Spain. All the leaders who have followed him share in the same responsibility. For six years they have done everything possible to subject this energetic and heroic proletariat of Spain to the most terrible defeats, and in spite of everything the ambiguity continues. They do not break the vicious circle. They do not rouse the masses against the bourgeois republic. They accommodate themselves to it and then, to make up for it, they write articles from time to time — on the proletarian revolution.

Do not tell me that the workers of the POUM fight heroically, etc. I know it as well as others do. But it is precisely their battle and their sacrifice that forces us to tell the truth and nothing but the

truth. Down with diplomacy, flirtation, and equivocation. One must know how to tell the bitterest truth when the fate of a war and of a revolution depend on it. We have nothing in common with the policy of Nin, nor with any who protect, camouflage, or defend it.

23 April, 1937

The longer the politics of the Popular Front keep their hold over the country and the revolution, the greater the danger of the exhaustion and disillusionment of the masses and of the military victory of fascism.

The responsibility for this situation rests entirely upon the Stalinists, Social Democrats, and anarchists, more precisely, on their leader, who, on the model of Kerensky, Tsereteli, Ebert, Schiedemann, Otto Bauer, and the like, subordinated the revolution of the people to the interests of the bourgeoisie...

“What kind of revolution do you have in mind,” the philistines of the Popular Front demand of us, “democratic or socialist? The victory of Largo Caballero’s army over Franco would mean the victory of democracy over fascism, that is, the victory of progress over reaction.”

One cannot listen to these arguments with a bitter smile. Before 1934 we explained to the Stalinists tirelessly that even in the imperialist epoch democracy continued to be preferable to fascism; that is, in all cases where hostile clashes take place between them, the revolutionary proletariat is obliged to support democracy against fascism.

However, we always added: We can and must defend bourgeois democracy not by bourgeois democratic means but by the methods of class struggle, which in turn pave the way for the replacement of bourgeois democracy by the dictatorship of the proletariat. This means in particular that in the process of defending bourgeois democracy, even with arms in hand, the party of the proletariat takes no responsibility for bourgeois democracy, does not enter its government, but maintains full freedom of criticism and of action in relation to all parties of the Popular Front, thus preparing the overthrow of bourgeois democracy at the next stage.

Any other policy is a criminal and hopeless attempt to use the blood of the workers as cement to hold together a bourgeois democracy that is inevitably doomed to collapse regardless of the immediate outcome of the civil war.

“But you ignore the peasantry!” cries some muddlehead. The Spanish peasantry has shown well enough its eager desire to stand shoulder to shoulder with the proletariat. All that is necessary is for the proletariat to actually enter the road of expropriation of the landed exploiters and usurers. But it is precisely the Stalinists and their new pupils, the “Socialists” and the “anarchists”, who have prevented the proletariat from putting forward a revolutionary agrarian program.

The government of Stalin-Caballero tries with all its might to imbue its army with the character of a

“democratic” guard for the defence of private property. That is the essence of the Popular Front. All the rest is phrase mongering. Precisely for that reason, the Popular Front is preparing the triumph of fascism. Whoever has not understood this is deaf and blind.

Is a military victory of the democratic guardian of capital possible over its fascist guard? It is possible. But since in the present epoch the fascist guard corresponds much more to the requirements of capital, the military victory of Stalin-Caballero could not be firm or lasting. Without the proletarian revolution the victory of “democracy” would only mean a round-about path to the very same fascism...

Nin says: “From the time that we were expelled from the Catalan government, reaction has intensified.” In fact it would have been appropriate to say: “Our participation in the Catalan government more readily provided the bourgeoisie with the chance to strengthen itself, drive us out, and openly enter the road of reaction.” The POUM as a matter of fact even now partly remains in the Popular Front. The leaders of the POUM plaintively try to persuade the government to take the road to socialist revolution. The POUM leaders respectfully try to make the CNT leaders understand at last the Marxist teaching about the state. The POUM leaders view themselves as “revolutionary” advisors to the leaders of the Popular Front. This position is lifeless and unworthy of revolutionaries.

It is necessary to openly and boldly mobilise the masses against the Popular Front government. It is necessary to expose, for the syndicalist and anarchist workers to see, the betrayals of those gentlemen who call themselves anarchists but in fact have turned out to be simple liberals. It is necessary to hammer away mercilessly at Stalinism as the worst agency of the bourgeoisie. It is necessary to feel yourselves leaders of the revolutionary masses, not advisors to the bourgeois government....

A military victory paid for with the blood of the workers would raise the self-consciousness and determination of the proletarian vanguard. In other words, the victory of the republican army of capital over the fascist army would inevitably mean the outbreak of civil war in the republican camp.

In this new civil war, the proletariat could conquer only if it has at its head a revolutionary party that knows how to win the confidence of the majority of the workers and the semi-proletarian peasants. If such a party is not present at the critical moment, the civil war with the republican camp threatens to lead to a victory of Bonapartism that would differ very little in character from the dictatorship of General Franco. That is why the politics of the Popular Front are a round-about path to the very same fascism...

It is necessary to break sharply, decisively, boldly — the umbilical cord of bourgeois public opinion. It is necessary to break from the petty-bourgeois parties including the syndicalist leaders. It is necessary to think the situation through to the end. It is necessary to descend to the masses, to the lowest and most oppressed layers. It is necessary to stop lulling them with illusions of a future victory that will come by itself. It is necessary to tell them the truth, however bitter it may be. It is necessary to teach them to distrust the petty-bourgeois agencies of capital. It is necessary to teach

them to trust in themselves. It is necessary to tie your fate to theirs inseparably. It is necessary to teach them to build their own combat organisation — soviets — in opposition to the bourgeois state.

Can one hope that the present leadership of the POUM will carry out this turn? Alas, the experience of six years of revolution leaves no room for such hopes. The revolutionists inside the POUM, as well as outside would be bankrupt if they limited their role to “persuading,” “winning over” Nin, Andrade, Gorkin, the way the latter try to win over Largo, Caballero, Companys, et al. The revolutionists must turn to the workers, to the depths, against the vacillations and waverings of Nin. Unity of the proletarian front does not mean capitulation to the centrists. The interest of the revolution are higher than the formal unity of the party....

Forty thousand members with a wavering and vacillating leadership are able only to disperse the proletariat and thereby to pave the way for catastrophe. Ten thousand, with a firm and perceptive leadership, can find the road to the masses, break them away from the influence of the Stalinists and Social Democrats, the charlatans and loudmouths, and assure them not just the episodic and uncertain victory of the republican troops over the fascist troops, but a total victory of the toilers over the exploiters. The Spanish proletariat has shown three times that it is able to carry out such a victory. The whole question is in the leadership!

May 12, 1937

It seems that the [Barcelona] insurrection was “spontaneous” in character, that is, it broke out unexpectedly for the leaders, including those of the POUM. This fact alone shows what an abyss had been dug between the anarchist and POUM leaders, on the one side, and the working masses, on the other. The conception propagated by Nin that “the proletariat can take power through peaceful means” has been proven absolutely false. We know nothing, or almost nothing, of the real position of the POUM at the time of the insurrection. But we do not believe in miracles. The position of the leaders of the POUM at the decisive moment must have been a simple continuation of their position during all the preceding period. More exactly, it is precisely in a decisive moment that the inconsistency of left centrism must be revealed in the most striking and tragic fashion. Such was, for example, the fate of Martov in the events of 1905 and 1917...

What is the meaning of the armistice in Barcelona that the dispatches mention: the defeat of the insurgents determined primarily by the inconsistency of the leadership, or the direct capitulation of the leaders, frightened by the pressure of the masses? We do not yet know. For the moment the struggle seems to be continuing outside Barcelona. Is a resumption of the offensive in Barcelona possible? Will not the repression on the part of the Stalinist-reformist scum give a new impulse to the action of the masses? We refrain from predicting here for lack of accurate information. Criticism of the leadership in any case retains its decisive importance, whatever the immediate course of events may be. In spite of the mistakes and weaknesses of the insurrection, we remain before the outside world indissolubly bound to the defeated workers. But this does not mean sparing the leadership, hiding its inconsistency, and keeping silent about its mistakes under the pretext of a purely sentimental solidarity.

8 August, 1937

When Andres Nin, the leader of the POUM, was arrested in Barcelona, there could not be the slightest doubt that the agents of the GPU would not let him out alive. The intentions of Stalin were revealed with exceptional clarity when the GPU, which holds the Spanish police in its clutches, published an announcement accusing Nin and the whole leadership of the POUM of being “agents” of Franco.

The absurdity of this accusation is clear to anyone who is acquainted with even the simplest facts about the Spanish revolution. The members of the POUM fought heroically against the fascists on all fronts in Spain. Nin is an old and incorruptible revolutionary. He defended the interests of the Spanish and Catalan peoples against the agents of the Soviet bureaucracy. That was why the GPU got rid of him by means of a well-prepared “raid” on the Barcelona jail. What role in this matter was played by the official Spanish authorities remains a matter for speculation.

Quite apart from the differences of opinion that separate me from the POUM, I must acknowledge that in the struggle that Nin led against the bureaucracy, it was Nin who was right. He tried to defend the independence of the Spanish proletariat from the diplomatic machinations and intrigues of the clique that holds power in Moscow. He did not want the POUM to become a tool in the hands of Stalin. He refused to cooperate with the GPU against the interests of the Spanish people. This was his only crime. And for this crime he paid with his life.

24 August, 1937

The July days of 1936, when the Catalan proletariat with correct leadership could, without additional efforts or sacrifices, have seized power and opened the era of the dictatorship of the proletariat throughout Spain, ended, largely through the fault of the POUM, in a regime between the proletariat (committees) and the bourgeoisie, represented by its lackeys (Stalinist, anarchist, and Socialist leaders). The interest of the workers was to do away with the equivocal and dangerous situation as rapidly as possible, by handing over all power to the committees, that is, to the Spanish soviets. The task of the bourgeoisie, on the other hand, was to do away with the committees in the name of “unity of power”. The participation of Nin in the government was a corporate part of the plan of the bourgeoisies, directed against the proletariat...

In Spain the May events took place not after four months but after six years of revolution. The masses of the whole country have had a gigantic experience. A long time ago, they lost the illusions of 1931, as well as the warmed-over illusions of the Popular Front. Again and again they have shown to every part of the country that they were ready to go through to the end. If the Catalan proletariat had seized power in May 1937 — as it had really seized it in July 1936 — they would have found support throughout all of Spain. The bourgeois-Stalinist reaction would not even have found two regiments with which to crush the Catalan workers. In the territory occupied by Franco not only the workers but also the peasants would have turned toward the Catalan proletariat, would have isolated the fascist army and brought about its irresistible disintegration. It is doubtful whether under these conditions any foreign government would have risked throwing its regiments onto the burning soil of Spain. Intervention would have become materially impossible, or at least extremely dangerous.

17 December, 1937

The anarchists had no independent position of any kind in the Spanish revolution. All they did was waver between Bolshevism and Menshevism. More precisely, the anarchist workers instinctively yearned to enter the Bolshevik road (19 July 1936 and May days of 1937) while the leaders, on the contrary, with all their might drove the masses into the camp of the Popular Front, i.e. of the bourgeois regime.

The anarchists revealed a fatal lack of understanding of the laws of the revolution and its tasks by seeking to limit themselves to their own trade unions, that is, to organisations permeated with the routine of peaceful times, and by ignoring what went on outside the framework of the trade unions, among the masses, among the political parties and in the government apparatus. Had the anarchists been revolutionists, they would first of all have called for the creation of soviets, which unite the representatives of all the toilers of city and country, including the most oppressed strata who never joined the trade unions. The revolutionary workers would have naturally occupied the dominant position in these soviets. The Stalinists would have remained an insignificant minority. The proletariat would have convinced itself of its own invincible strength. The apparatus of the bourgeois state would have hung suspended in the air. One strong blow would have sufficed to pulverise this apparatus. The socialist revolution would have received a powerful impetus.

Instead of this, the anarcho-syndicalists, seeking to hide from “politics” in the trade unions, turned out to be, to the great surprise of the whole world and themselves, a fifth wheel in the cart of bourgeois democracy. But not for long; a fifth wheel is superfluous. After Garcia Oliver and his cohorts helped Stalin and his henchmen to take power away from the workers, the anarchists themselves were driven out of the government of the Popular Front. Even then they found nothing better to do than jump on the victor’s bandwagon and assure him of their devotion. The fear of the petty bourgeois before the big bourgeois, of the petty bureaucrat before the big bureaucrat, they covered up with lachrymose speeches about the sanctity of the united front (between the victim and the executioners) and about the inadmissibility of every kind of dictatorship, including their own. “After all, we could have taken power in July 1936...” “After all, we could have taken power in May 1937...” The anarchists begged Stalin-Negrin to recognise and reward their treachery to the revolution. A revolting picture!...

The conditions for victory of the masses in a civil war against the army of exploiters are very simple in their essence.

1. The fighters of a revolutionary army must be clearly aware of the fact that they are fighting for their full social liberation and not for the re-establishment of the old (“democratic”) forms of exploitation.
2. The workers and peasants in the rear of the revolutionary army as well as in the rear of the enemy must know and understand the same thing.

3. The propaganda on their own front as well as on the enemy front and in both rears must be completely permeated with the spirit of social revolution. The slogan "First victory, then reforms" is the slogan of the oppressors and exploiters from the Biblical kings down to Stalin.
4. Politics are determined by those class and strata that participate in the struggle. The revolutionary masses must have a state apparatus that directly and immediately expresses their will. Only the soviets of workers', soldiers' and peasants' deputies can act as such an apparatus.
5. The revolutionary army must not only proclaim but also immediately realise in life the more pressing measures of social revolution in the provinces won by them: the expropriation of provisions, manufactured articles, and other stores on hand and the transfer of these to the needy; the re-division of shelter and housing in the interests of the toilers and especially of the families of the fighters; the expropriation of the land and agricultural inventory in the interests of the peasants; the establishment of workers' control and soviet power in place of the former bureaucracy.
6. Enemies of the socialist revolution, that is, exploiting elements and their agents, even if masquerading as "democrats", "republicans", "socialists" and "anarchists" must be mercilessly driven out of the army.
7. At the head of each military unit must be placed commissars possessing irreproachable authority as revolutionists and soldiers.
8. In every military unit there must be a firmly welded nucleus of the most self-sacrificing fighters, recommended by the workers' organisations. The members of the nucleus have but one privilege: to be the first under fire.
9. The commanding corps necessarily includes at first many alien and unreliable elements among the personnel. Their testing, retesting and sifting must be carried through on the basis of combat experience, recommendations of commissars and testimonials of rank-and-file fighters. Coincident with this must proceed an intense training of commanders drawn from the ranks of revolutionary workers.
10. The strategy of civil war must combine the rules of military art with the tasks of the social revolution. Not only in propaganda but also in military operations it is necessary to take into account the social composition of the various military units of the enemy (bourgeois volunteers, mobilised peasants, or as in Franco's case, colonial slaves); and in choosing lines of operation, it is necessary to rigorously take into consideration the social structure of the corresponding territories (industrial regions, peasant regions, revolutionary or reactionary, regions of oppressed nationalities, etc). In brief, revolutionary policy dominates strategy.
11. Both the revolutionary government and executive committee of the workers and peasants must know how to win the complete confidence of the army and of the toiling population.

12. Foreign policy must have as its main objective the awakening of the revolutionary consciousness of the workers, the exploited peasants, and oppressed nationalities of the whole world.

20 August, 1940

The extent to which the working class movement has been thrown backward may be gauged by the condition not only of the mass organisation, but also of the ideological groupings and those theoretical inquiries in which so many groups are engaged...

These critics of Bolshevism are all theoretical cowards, for the simple reason that they have nothing solid under their feet. In order not to reveal their own bankruptcy, they juggle facts and prowl around the opinions of others. They confine themselves to hints and half-thoughts as if they just haven't the time to delineate their full wisdom. As a matter of fact they possess no wisdom at all. Their haughtiness is lined with intellectual charlatanism...

In May 1937 the workers of Catalonia rose not only without their own leadership but also against it. The anarchist leaders — pathetic and contemptible bourgeoisie masquerading cheaply as revolutionists — have repeated hundreds of times in their press that had the CNT wanted to take power and set up their dictatorship in May, they could have done so without any difficulty. This time the anarchist leaders speak the unadulterated truth. The POUM leadership actually dragged at the tail of the CNT, only they covered up their policy with a different phraseology. It was thanks to this and this alone that the bourgeoisie succeeded in crushing the May uprising of the “immature” proletariat...

Why did the working class as a whole follow a bad leadership?...

The secret is that a people is comprised of hostile classes, and the classes themselves are comprised of different and in part antagonistic layers that fall under different leadership; furthermore every people falls under the influence of other peoples who are likewise comprised of classes. Governments do not express the systematically growing “maturity” of a “people” but are the product of the struggle between different classes and the different layers within one and the same class, and finally, the action of external forces — alliances, conflicts, wars, and so on. To this should be added that a government, once it has established itself, may endure much longer than the relationship of forces that produced it. It is precisely out of this historical contradiction that revolutions, coups d'état, counterrevolutions, etc. arise.

The very same dialectical approach is necessary in dealing with the question of the leadership of a class. Imitating the liberals, our sages tacitly accept the axiom that every class gets the leadership it deserves. In reality leadership is not at all a mere “reflection” of a class or the product of its own free creativeness...

The Marxist interpretation, that is, the dialectical and not the scholastic interpretation of the interrelationship between a class and its leadership, does not leave a single stone unturned of our

author's legalistic sophistry.

Yet during a revolution the consciousness of a class is the most dynamic process directly determining the course of the revolution. Was it possible in January 1917 or even in March, after the overthrow of czarism, to give an answer to the question whether the Russian proletariat had sufficiently "matured" for the conquest of power in eight to nine months?

The working class was at that time extremely heterogeneous socially and politically. During the years of the war it had been renewed by 30-40 percent from the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie, often reactionary, from backward peasants, from women, and from youth. The Bolshevik Party in March 1917 was followed by an insignificant minority of the working class, and furthermore there was discord within the party itself. The overwhelming majority of the workers supported the Mensheviks and the "Social Revolutionaries", that is, conservative social patriots. The situation was even less favourable with regard to the army and the peasantry. We must add to this: the general low level of culture in the country, the lack of political experience in the provinces, let alone the peasants and soldiers.

What were the advantages of Bolshevism? A clear and thoroughly thought-out revolutionary conception at the beginning of the revolution was held only by Lenin. The Russian cadres of the party were scattered and to a considerable degree bewildered. But the party had authority among the advanced workers. Lenin had great authority with the party cadres. Lenin's political conception corresponded to the actual development of the revolution and was reinforced by each new event. These advantages worked wonders in a revolutionary situation, that is, in conditions of bitter class struggle. The party quickly aligned its policy to correspond with Lenin's conception; to correspond, that is, with the actual course of the revolution. Thanks to this, it met with firm support among tens of thousands of advanced workers. Within a few months, by basing itself upon the development of the revolution, the party was able to convince the majority of the workers of the correctness of its slogans. This majority, organised into soviets, was able in its turn to attract the soldiers and peasants.

How can this dynamic, dialectical process be exhausted by a formula of the maturity or immaturity of the proletariat? A colossal factor in the maturity of the Russian proletariat in February or March 1917 was Lenin. He did not fall from the skies. He personified the revolutionary tradition of the working class. For Lenin's slogans to find their way to the masses, cadres had to exist, even though numerically small at the beginning; the cadres had to have confidence in the leadership, a confidence based on the entire experience of the past. To cancel these elements from one's calculations is simply to ignore the living revolution, to substitute for it an abstraction, the "relationship of forces"; because the development of the revolution precisely consists of the incessant and rapid change in the relationship of forces under the impact of the changes in the consciousness of the proletariat, the attraction of the backward layers to the advanced, the growing assurance of the class in its own strength. The vital mainspring this process is the party, just as the vital mainspring in the mechanism of the party is its leadership. The role and the responsibility of the leadership in a revolutionary epoch is colossal...

The historical falsification consists in this, that the responsibility for the defeat of the Spanish masses is unloaded on the working masses and not those parties that paralysed or simply crushed

the revolutionary movement of the masses. The attorneys of the POUM simply deny the responsibility of the leaders, in order thus to escape shouldering their own responsibility. This impotent philosophy, which seeks to reconcile defeats as a necessary link in the chain of cosmic developments, is completely incapable of posing and refuses to pose the question of such concrete factors as programmes, parties, and personalities that were the organisers of defeat. This philosophy of fatalism and prostration is diametrically opposed to Marxism as the theory of revolutionary action.

Compiled by SM

Revolution and betrayal in Spain 1936-7

It is usually called the “Spanish civil war”, the thirty month struggle that began in July 1936, when the Spanish military, led by three generals, Franco, Mola and Sanjurjo — of whom one, Franco, would emerge as dictator — revolted against the Popular Front government which had been elected five months earlier. It was a civil war, a tremendous civil war in which German and Italian “volunteers”, British and Irish (Blue Shirt) fascists and many others fought for the Francoite, and “anti-facists”, British, American, French, German, Italian, and Irish (Republican) volunteers fought for the Spanish Republic against Spanish and international fascism. Even so, to describe what happened in Spain after July 1936 as a civil war is to diminish it.

It was a working-class revolution. After October 1917 in Russia it was the most important working-class revolution of the 20th century. And, therefore, it was a great laboratory of working-class politics. That revolution is not only something which we should glory in and keep fresh in the memory of the international labour movement, but an experience with tremendous lessons for us and all future socialists.

When the generals issued their “pronunciamento” and started to move the Spanish colonial army from Morocco, where it had been inflicting savage repression on the Moroccans, the mildly leftist Popular Front government in Madrid was inclined to bow down peacefully before the military might of the armed bourgeoisie. If they had had their way, “Spain 1936” would in history have been an earlier version of Chile in 1973, when an armed forces revolt against a mildly leftist government quickly put General Pinochet in a position to organise the mass murder of working-class militants and leftists.

In fact, the workers of Madrid, led, essentially, by anarchists, rose in revolt, built barricades against the fascist armies and armed themselves by opening the arsenals of the state. They raised a battle cry, adapted from the cry of the French armies which resisted the German invasion in 1914 — “No pasaran”, they should not pass. This working class revolt is what that determined that it was to be a civil war and not an abject surrender to the fascist generals.

Everywhere in Spain there was social polarisation. Everywhere the bourgeoisie and large parts of

the petty bourgeoisie rallied to the fascists. There were very few bourgeois on the side of the Spanish bourgeois republic that now fought for its life against the fascists. In that government and behind it, were the parties of the petty bourgeois “left” and the Stalinists. They gave it its bourgeois character by keeping everything the government did or licensed within the limits of respect for bourgeois property.

As Trotsky put it, they allied with “the shadow of the bourgeoisie”.

They substituted in the Republican areas for the bourgeoisie who had fled to Franco. They thereby tied their own hands in the fight with the Francoites. Radical land reform in the Republic endorsed and proclaimed by the government, would have allowed the Republicans to appeal to the peasant soldiers of the fascist army over the heads of their officers.

If the Madrid government had proclaimed the Spanish colonies, Morocco for instance, liberated, they could have appealed to the Moorish soldiers of Franco's army to rise against the generals, or desert to the Republic. They did none of that. Their self-imposed “bourgeois” limitations ruled out everything of that sort. Above all, in the Republican areas they stood against a socialist revolution.

For the workers who rose against the Madrid government to defend the Republic from fascism did not stop with arming themselves, building barricades, fighting the fascists and rounding up fascists sympathisers and suspected sympathisers. They began to carry through the socialist transformation of Spanish society.

This working-class socialist revolution — which is portrayed in detail by Miriam Gould's article in this Workers' Liberty — reached its highest point in Catalonia, the most industrially developed part of Spain, and its capital Barcelona.

There for ten months after July 1936, the working class held power. They took over the factories and the running of the whole of society. They organised workers' committees in enterprises and streets. They believed that they had power and fought to defend and extend it.

Two forces on the Republican side destroyed this Spanish workers' revolution and thus prepared the way for the victory of fascism — anarchism and Stalinism.

The major trade union in Spain, the CNT, was anarchist-led. Anarchism was a mass movement, the biggest proclaimedly revolutionary force in Spain.

Anarchists played a tremendously positive role in July 1936 in helping the workers see the wretched surrender of the Madrid Popular Front government for the treason that it was, and in spearheading the working class' rejection of it. Anarchists like Buenaventura Durrutti organised the defence of Madrid. They encouraged and led the working-class revolution in Catalonia.

But as anarchists they were in principle against all states. They were against the working class organising its own, working-class, semi-state.

In practice in Catalonia this meant that they were against the working class consolidating the power it already had. That was to prove fatal in the face of the Stalinist onslaught against working-class Barcelona in May 1937.

In the course of the civil war, some anarchist leaders, reconsidering their politics, became convinced that a state was after all necessary if the fascists were to be defeated and crushed. Their practical conclusion? They supported, and some joined, the Popular Front government!

The honest communist-anarchists failed to make the necessary alteration in their politics, failed to see the imperative necessity for building a democratic working-class state. This was the main single “subjective” factor, the political weakness in the revolutionary working-class movement itself, which helped destroy the Spanish revolution — thereby ensuring a fascist victory and the consolidation in all of Spain of the fascist regime which would rule Spain for the next four decades.

The other factor was international Stalinism. From the crazed ‘ultra-leftism’ that had led them to refuse a united front with the German Social Democrats against Hitler, they swung sharply to the right in 1934. From 1935 — the seventh and last ‘Communist International’ congress — they advocated a Popular Front movement, and Popular Front governments, consisting of “anti-fascists”. In Britain their notion of who they wanted in the Popular Front extended as far as Winston Churchill and the Tory party.

They supported the Popular Front in Spain.

The leader of the new Russian bureaucratic ruling class, Stalin, who controlled Russia and the “Communist International”, was concerned, by way of the Popular Fronts, to assure the bourgeoisie of Western Europe that they didn’t need to turn to fascism in order to “deal with” troublesome revolutionary workers: the Communist Parties would do that for them — so long as the ruling bourgeoisie kept up friendly relations with the USSR. The 1935 Franco-Russian mutual defence pact known as the Stalin-Laval pact, was one of the most important turning points. The story circulated that Laval, himself a renegade socialist, said to Stalin, who had just committed himself to defend the French bourgeois republic: “And what if the French Communists won’t accept national defence?” The taciturn Stalin responded by slowly drawing his finger across his throat!

In Spain, Stalin set out to show just how useful he could be to the bourgeoisie. The Spanish ruling class had fled the Republican areas to rally behind Franco? Even so, the Spanish CP would ensure that, in their absence, the bourgeois order would be maintained. They faithfully did that.

A small force in July 1936, the Spanish Stalinist party over time became the main force on the Republican side.

Volunteers — honest people most of them, sincere anti-fascists — flocked to Spain, mainly organised by the Stalinist international. So did legions of Stalin's political police.

As the most resolute and ruthless pro-bourgeois force on the Republican side, the Stalinists quickly recruited people who would never have joined the Communist Party when it was a revolutionary workers' party. Stalin sent guns — for full payment in gold: the entire gold reserve of the Madrid government wound up in Moscow — to a republic on which the European bourgeois states, “democratic” as well as fascist, had imposed an arms embargo. The power and strength of the Communist Party grew correspondingly — as the party of bourgeois “order”.

In Catalonia the Stalinists were seen for what they were by most workers, and loathed. But the Stalinists built up a Spanish state machine under their own control and in May 1937 provoked armed clashes with anarchists and quasi-Trotskyists (the POUM, the Workers' Party of Marxist Unity) in Barcelona. The revolutionary workers' movement was crushed.

May 1937 was to prove the culmination point of the Spanish workers' revolution. The anarchists and POUMists were defeated. The workers' revolution was suppressed.

After that, the Stalinists conducted a reign of terror in the Republican areas, converting the Republic to the best of their ability into a totalitarian state, in which the Russian police and their Spanish agents were all powerful. They murdered the POUM leader Andreas Nin — a founder of the Spanish Communist Party — and countless others.

They destroyed the revolution.

By the crushing the working class in the Republican areas they undermined and sapped the Republic's power of resistance to the fascists — they crushed the vital forces of the people, and in the first place of the workingclass, those who had made July 1936 into “The Month of the Beginning of Civil War”, not the “Month of Abject Surrender” which it would have been if the Popular Front government had had its way.

The last resistance to the fascists collapsed in March 1939. The Francoites butchered many tens of thousands of workers and left-wingers (and Stalinists too), cauterising Spain politically for two generations.

In what follows Marxists, Stalinists, Anarchists, Fascists and Workers in the Spanish Revolution of 1936-37 Miriam Gould tells the story of the Spanish socialist revolution; and Leon Trotsky, watching events from afar explains why what happened happened as it did. Others, including George Orwell, tell of their experiences fighting in Spain

Trotsky puts the experience into the perspective of the tragic series of defeats for the working class and revolutionary socialism of which Spain in 1936-7, when the workers made a revolution but tragically could not consolidate it, was the most important.

Sean Matgamna

Spain 1936/7: A Study in Workers' Power

By Miriam Gould

In many respects there were very close parallels between the proletarian revolutions of [Russia] 1917 and [Spain] 1936. Spain and Russia were both gripped by profound economic crises rooted in their semi-feudal land systems. Both were agricultural economies based on a poverty-stricken peasantry. Capitalism had made little headway in Spain because of its inability to compete with the great industrial nations which had got into the field ahead of it; and because of the restricted internal market open to it Spanish industry struggled along by supplementing the economies of the major powers. The Basque country produced steel and iron, the Asturias coal, and Catalonia textiles (300,000 textile workers were concentrated in that one province). Catalonia also had some light metallurgical and consumption-goods industry.

Neither in Spain nor Russia had the capitalists been able to wrest control of the state from the hands of the feudal aristocracy, linked as it was with the banking interests (native and foreign) who financed the agricultural holdings and operations. Hence industry suffered a continual hamstringing of its activities: no tariff protection, heavy taxes, lack of facilities, such as roads, power, etc. All these difficulties only worsened the condition of the proletariat, already underpaid because of their capitalism's unfavorable position on the world market (fifteen dollars a week was the wage of a skilled auto worker in Barcelona in 1936).

In Russia the situation was brought to a climax by World War One; in Spain, by the 1929 depression. These weak, semi-feudal economies could not stand any additional stress. The starving, long-suffering peasants stirred into action and peasant revolts began, supported by strikes of the city workers. They led to the overthrow of the Tsar in February, 1917, and the abdication of King Alfonso in 1931. So began two social revolutions. Here the similarity stops.

The organisational history of the class struggle in these two countries was vastly different. In Russia there was a socialist vanguard party oriented toward the establishment of a workers' state. After the initial anti-monarchist revolt that started the revolution, the Bolsheviks were able, thanks to the genius of Lenin, to take full advantage of subsequent political developments. They won the support of the masses of workers and peasants, and removed state power from the shaky hands of the liberals and capitalists. This the Communist Party did in the eight months between February and October, 1917. There was no such party in Spain, and events took an entirely different turn, the most obvious feature of which was a lapse of five years before proletarian revolution succeeded bourgeois revolution.

The indispensable missing factor

The great weakness of the Iberian proletariat was its lack of a true Marxist party, and its division into two mass union organisations (the reformist socialists and the anarchists), neither of which wanted to fight for workers' power. The socialists controlled the UGT (General Workers Union) and the anarchists the CNT (National Confederation of Workers). The UGT practiced business unionism, collaboration with all the governmental agencies, etc., while the CNT was anarcho-syndicalist, always calling general strikes (with no strike benefits), minor insurrections, putsches and the like in anticipation of the general strike that was to inaugurate The Revolution.

All of the proletariat was enrolled in one or the other of these organisations. Their numerical relation to one another (each had about one and a half million members) did not change appreciably between 1931 and 1936. Neither recruited from the other, nor did any third, Bolshevik, party appear to crystallise the discontent that existed within both of them. The long static period of labour politics is in strong contrast to the regroupings, splits, individual and mass defections from the reformist parties that Lenin fomented in the short interval between February and October 1917.

The split in the labour movement, plus the lack of a revolutionary party, was responsible for the five years of indecisive class conflicts between 1931 and 1936, years in which the working class saw demonstrated again and again the inability of its leaders to mobilise its strength and strike a definitive blow for freedom. The peasants became disillusioned in the republic in this interval because it failed completely to improve their miserable situation. It did not divide the big estates among the peasants, nor did it give them easy access to that much coveted land as renters.

Agrarian resentment found expression in the victory of the Catholic-led reactionaries, the CEDA, in the 1933 elections. A tremendous leftward movement of the working class in defence of its economic organisations met this right-wing political victory.

The strike wave of 1934 reached its climax in the Asturian revolt of October, when the miners of the North created active united front groups, seized all the power in their region, and commenced an attack on Oviedo, the capital of the province. Their Commune held out for fifteen days, and then was subdued by Moroccan troops and foreign legionaires: neither the CNT nor the UGT came to its support. The UGT came out on a "peaceful general strike", but that was insufficient to keep the police and military detachments out of the Asturias. Indeed, only a well planned armed insurrection could have saved the first Spanish Commune. The CNT boycotted even the mild efforts of the socialists to support the Asturians.

The most important feature about the Asturian Commune was this, that once the masses overcame their division, they made an immediate bid for power, and simultaneously commenced a socialist economic transformation. October was a dress rehearsal for July. In the interval between the fall of 1934 and the summer of 1936 there were still no significant shifts of influence within the labour movement, although there was a certain disgust among the Catalan vanguard toward the CNT for its ignominious role in the 1934 events. The few so-called Trotskyists on the scene were unable to make their ideas felt. (Most of the Fourth Internationalists, Nin, Andra de, Molins, entered the Maurin-led POUM, or Workers' Party of Marxist Unity, which waged ineffective politics against the

anarchist-controlled CNT. Another handful went into the SP and was not heard from again.)

However, despite their traditional organisational weakness, the revolutionary Iberian people continued to press for an improvement of their economic conditions. The fierce economic struggles forced the landowners and bankers into action, and the fascist revolt of Generals Franco, Sanjurjo et al was prepared.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised that this counter-revolutionary offensive of the owning class was possible only because of the complete lack of revolutionary political leadership in the proletarian camp, a failure which kept the powerful movements of the masses limited to purely economic actions which had no future unless they were generalised into political action. In this case it was only too clear that Spanish politics was concentrated economics.

A Spontaneous Revolution*

The fascist counter-revolution was the blow that fused the divided Spanish proletariat into one revolutionary anti-fascist mass, which rose spontaneously in insurrection to prevent the success of the military coup. The Iberian proletariat showed, as has been shown before in other countries, that it was capable of basic, decisive political action without the leadership of a vanguard party. The workers' reaction to the open fascist attack had two important characteristics. First, their action was universal throughout the peninsula, and was everywhere identical in form: in all the principal cities, two days before the revolt was scheduled: to come off, a general strike was declared, the workers took to the streets and armed themselves. This happened in Barcelona, Madrid, Malaga, Oviedo, Seville, Lerida, Gerona, Cartagena, as well as in hundreds of smaller towns and villages. Secondly, and equally important, in so doing the masses acted independently of, and in most cases against the will of their official leadership.

Both the UGT and CNT leaders opposed the masses coming into the streets to demonstrate — much less to rise in insurrection. In spite of the open secret of the rebellion scheduled for Sunday 19 July, the Madrid UGT — far from taking the logical step of calling a political general strike — tried to stop even the legitimate economic strike of the construction workers because of the troubled situation! Claridad (the official UGT daily paper) urged them not to respect the CNT picket lines, and to be sure to report for work on Monday, the 20th. On Saturday night, when the fascists had already seized power in Spanish Morocco, the Social-Democratic and Communist Parties called on the workers to strike only where the fascists were already in power! Where they had not yet succeeded, the people were to leave all to the government — the same which had let the fascists arm and rise! What a monumental betrayal of their role as leaders of the proletariat! The strategy of the social-democratic leaders was a sure guarantee of defeat.

The July events had proved conclusively that there was a only one virile class in Spain that could organise the anti-fascist war: the proletariat. And their method was that of uprooting fascism completely by overthrowing the system that breeds it. This the Spanish social-democrats could not tolerate for an instant, and fought relentlessly until the final victory of Franco.

The anarchists were not much better. In Barcelona, the workers started to arm on Friday. Saturday

the left republican government of Catalonia** called out the Civil Guards (national strike-breaking police) to disarm the unionists and raid their headquarters for arms. The top anarchist leaders including Durruti, Garcia Oliver, Ascaso, de Santillan, urged their members to surrender their arms peaceably to the police, since they considered a successful anti-fascist action impossible without the support of the bourgeois state, and the latter still denied the existence of the revolt. The thousands of CNT workers gathered outside their union hall refused to give up their precious guns and only a few hours later were using them in desperate battle against the fascist troops which had occupied the main buildings of the town.

Since the treachery and incompetence of the leaders of the mass labour organisations prevented an organised defense against the fascists, what was the nature of the popular action that stopped them? And who led it?

The very nature of the fascist plans (which were broadcast through working-class neighborhoods by the telegraph and telephone workers) determined the first steps the people took. In every province the military governor was to march on the main cities, occupy the telephone exchanges, railway stations, public buildings and other strategic spots. When this news leaked out Friday, a general strike was declared by the local industrial, or peasant, unions. In the small towns and villages of Catalonia, Levant, Asturias, the centre and the south, anti-fascist committees were organised by the local unions and party branches. In many respects the small-scale actions in the rural areas were better organised than the mass action in the capitals, although the latter was in every sense of the word decisive. The local Revolutionary Committee (sometimes called the Popular Committee, or the Militia Committee, the Executive Committee, or just el comité) planned how to surround the town barracks and persuade the soldiers to come over to its side, it planned the blowing up of local bridges and highways if necessary; it arrested local fascists and occupied the strategic buildings in the vicinity. This pattern was universal in the smaller towns, where the Sunday revolt just failed to come off.

Proletarian initiative

In the cities the apparatus of the big labour organisations concentrated there prevented such complete and centralised preparations for meeting the rebellion. Here the initiative was taken by local industrial unions, factory committees, socialist or POUM party branches, and the FAI*** district defence committees of the proletarian neighbourhoods. Decisive battles were fought in Barcelona, Madrid, Malaga, Seville, Toledo and a few other cities. In Valencia and some other Southern towns, the fascists held back, waiting to see the outcome elsewhere. Barcelona, in whose vicinity was concentrated forty per cent of Spain's proletariat, was the Petrograd of the Iberian revolution. Madrid, the capital of the country, was the other decisive city.

This article is not an account of the development of the Spanish civil war; here we want only to examine the nature and actions of the proletarian organs that launched the war by means of a social revolution. Suffice it to say that the spontaneous rank and file actions of the first weeks cleared two thirds of the peninsula of fascists, and brought three-quarters of the population into the scope of their activities.

The Russian dual power of February-October, 1917, was also launched by the appearance of popular democratic organs, the soviets, whose historic role was identical with that of the Spanish committees. Both were the organs of power of the rising proletarian revolution. And, naturally, the fundamental differences in the character of the organised class struggle of the two countries found expression in these most democratic of all political forms.

The existence in Russia of a party consciously oriented toward a working-class seizure of power forced on the soviets continued discussion of basic political problems. It sharpened and clarified the positions of all the participating labour groups. The political agitation of the Bolsheviks, both in and out of the soviets, against their anti-working class majority, made the masses conscious of the role the new power could and should play; and kept continually before the people the problem of state power. The Bolsheviks were always pushing the soviets to the left.

(Some of the concrete actions that Lenin urged on the soviets are listed here as a yardstick for comparison with the accomplishments of the Spanish committees: workers' control of industry to stop the economic sabotage of the capitalists; unification and either state control or nationalisation of the banks, abolition of commercial secrets; distribution of land to the peasants; regulation of consumption to equalise the war burden, by means of revolutionary democratic methods, such as compulsory organisation into consumers' societies, labour duty for the rich, equal distribution of all consumption goods, popular supply committees of the poor to control the consumption of the rich, etc. These measures were not carried out in Russia until after the Bolshevik-controlled soviets seized state power.)

In Spain, where there was no such vanguard party, the development of the workers' committee, after they inaugurated dual power, was altogether different. Instead of becoming national policy-making and administrative bodies, they remained local united fronts of action. After September, they were not recognised by any of the working class parties. The very fact of their continued existence, after the numerous orders for their dissolution issued by their official leaders, was an accomplishment. The committees lived on because they were the only organisations on the scene with an intention of carrying out the extremely revolutionary will of the Spanish anti-fascists.

They concentrated on resolving local economic and political problems and left untouched the ultimately decisive national problems of getting a coordinated state power, a unified army and carrying through a general planned economic and financial reorganisation, beginning with the banks.

The local factory and neighborhood committees carried out on their own initiative economic and political reforms more drastic than those Lenin advocated in Russia. But because their revolution lacked just that planned approach to the basic problems that the Bolsheviks had supplied, the committees proved unable to consolidate their superior gains by the creation of a powerful workers' state to protect them. With this all-important weakness in mind, let us examine some of the things the committees did accomplish to see how far along the road to workers' power the spontaneous acts of a mid-twentieth century proletariat could take them.

Economic power

A few days after 19 July the local unions, municipal committees and factory committees began confiscating public services, hotels, apartments and office buildings, the transportation system, and all the principal industries. (Immediately prior to the rebellion they had begun seizing cars, food, guns, etc.) On July 30 the Barcelona Local Committee of the CNT had issued its famous order: "All denunciations from workers whose capitalists refuse to open their factories or other places of production should be presented to this federation, so that it can proceed to confiscation with precise legal formalities." Of course the legality of the confiscations actually depended on who won the dual power struggle, i.e., who got control of the state power. But that supremely important political question was universally ignored at the time. The expropriations continued in increasing numbers until September. By that time all of anti-fascist Spain's industry, commerce and agriculture had passed into the hands of committees of some variety. (Except for the Basque regions, where a powerful workers' control existed, a few small businesses and private land-holdings in Catalonia and Levant.)

In Russia the course of the economic revolution was vastly different. The private capitalists retained a large measure of control over their plants during the February-October period. They were able to lock out workers, disrupt the economy and exert political pressure by many other tricks. Only after the Bolsheviks seized state power and ended the dual power were heavy industry, transportation and the banking system nationalised.

Most of Spain's small capitalist class fled to France on the eve of the rising, as did the fascist land-owners. The petty industrialists who remained either assumed managerial posts in the confiscated industries or lost all contact with them and lived off their personal bank accounts, which, along with the banking system as a whole, were left untouched. Needless to say, the lack of a central plan for expropriating and reorganising the economy led to a great variety of forms of "workers' ownership," which was what the workers confidently thought they were insuring. There was a sad lack of that "flood of decrees" with which Lenin was accused of deluging Russia in 1917: those same decrees would have instantly taken on a concrete socialist reality had they been promulgated from Barcelona or Madrid that summer of 1936.

The Spanish revolutionists were spared some of the trials that harassed the Russians. At least they had no struggle against individual capitalist and technical sabotage after the July revolt. The capitalists were gone, and the workers' control, reinforced by the proletariat in arms, was too powerful for the technicians to trifle with. But the Spanish workers' power met sabotage from the state apparatus in Madrid: a sabotage that was exercised in the realm of national and international finance and trade. The workers had the individual factories, and even industries, firmly under control: their problems were posed at the initial stages of the dual power, on a more advanced historical level than in Russia. Their main enemy, in the absence of the individual capitalists, was the state itself; nor did this make the struggle any easier — a point to be borne in mind by those who point to the "abdication" of the French capitalists as facilitating the coming European revolution.

The universal and spontaneous expropriation of Spain's social wealth by the very bottom strata of society was not limited to Catalonia, as is commonly and mistakenly supposed. All the major industries, including those dominated by the reformist UGT, were collectivised and put under workers' control. Outside of Catalonia, the railroads, metallurgical industry, construction, public

services, maritime transport, mines and, most important of all, the land — all were expropriated by the toilers. Whether this property remained expropriated was a political question, but the masses had done all that could be asked of them.

Here again, in the question of the land, the basic economic problems were posed more sharply than in Russia: the further decay of capitalism in the nineteen years since 1917 had advanced popular consciousness of what is necessary to insure adequate production for all. It is significant that collective farming was the common form of organisation of the expropriated land in Spain especially when we remember the long struggle of the Russian bolsheviks against the ever-present problem of the kulaks and the tragedy of the forced collectivisation finally put through by Stalin. One reason for the immediate collectivisation of the land in Spain was the experience of the landless share-croppers and agricultural day labourers as members of the UGT and CNT peasant unions. Another was the long Spanish tradition of village and communal cooperation. Still another was the improvement in transportation which enabled the proletarian revolutionists from the cities to penetrate all the agricultural regions with propaganda for collectivisation.

Along with the mass expropriation of the means of production came the growth of a system of supply committees, which organized distribution on an equalitarian basis. The strong desire of the people to impose a labour duty on the rich became one of the main points of contention between the rank and file committees and the top labour leaders, who managed to prevent it. As was the case with all the other popular organisms cast up by the people, the supply and distribution committees were a spontaneous growth, and a surprise to the “official” labor leaders.

Political power

Inevitably, since the masses who carried out this social revolution were members of already existing labour organisations, the leaders of these organisations intervened in the revolution with disastrous results. That story we leave for another time. Here we limit ourselves to a brief record of what the workers were able to accomplish in spite of their misleaders. We will only sketch the main line of socialist and anarchist official policy because it is indispensable for an understanding of the subsequent political activities of the committees.

After their members disobeyed their orders by conducting a general strike, an armed insurrection, and finally a completely unauthorised expropriation of the expropriators, the labour leaders caught their breath and tried to regain control of the situation under the guise of centralising and coordinating nationally what the masses had done on a regional and local scale. Once again it was a case of elemental mass action, that left the self-styled “revolutionary leaders” far behind. Even the most radical party in Spain, the POUM, did not keep up with the proletariat. It was calling for economic concessions from the generality while the workers were confiscating the factories and establishing dual power. It should have been raising slogans of “All Power to the Committees.”

For the aroused masses, arms in hand, had not stopped with the factory seizures: they took political steps to consolidate their control by erecting a powerful dual-power apparatus throughout the length and breadth of the land. They acted without knowing it on Lenin’s dictum: Without workers’ power there can be no workers’ control. The revolutionary anti-fascist committees assumed full power in

Catalonia and some degree of power in all the rest of anti-fascist Spain's towns and villages.

Political acts by workers

The anti-fascist committees set up sub-committees of investigation and control, i.e., workers' police. Reliable militants from all groups worked together in these police corps, which resembled the Bolshevik Red Guard. Again with this difference: their control from the beginning of the dual power was more complete and unchallenged than in Russia. There were no instances of bourgeois or middle class crowds jeering or even assembling against the will of the Spanish workers' police. Just the opposite: these respectable elements in Spain tried to pass themselves off as anarchists, to buy or steal union cards off their domestic servants. They quit wearing ties, hats and their good suits in frantic efforts to pass through the vigilant street and building patrols of the proletariat.

Other political acts of the workers' power organs included seizure of the government buildings, barracks, railroad stations, post offices, customs, etc. They met no opposition, once the "so-called militarists" (as they contemptuously termed the fascists) were overcome. And who would dare oppose the victorious anti-fascists, who alone had put down the rebellion in most of Spain? In this respect they got off to a better psychological start in their relations with the middle class than did the Bolsheviks, who seized power after a relatively peaceful internal political struggle, marked only by the weak counter-revolutionary attempt of Kornilov.

The revolutionary rank and file authors of the fascist defeat followed their victory by an immediate clean-up of all military and reactionary circles. Popular tribunals of trade union militants administered swift justice to all known fascist and anti-labour elements. This revolutionary terror of the first weeks was not controlled — or desired — by the labour leadership.

The main function of these armed dual-power organs was to protect the economic conquests of the workers. But once the fascists were gone and the revolution greeted enthusiastically by all, the armed workers were not at all sure whom they had to protect it against. A Lenin or a Trotsky could have told them: against the state, that final repository of capitalist power, and against their own treacherous leadership. How incessantly Lenin put before the Russian masses the questions, "Where is the power?" and "Where is the counterrevolution?" Later on in the course of the dual power's development, the local committees began to realise where the counter-revolution lay, even though every political party on the scene tried to keep the knowledge from them.

From this brief description we can summarise the spontaneous revolution of July, 1936, thus: led by united fronts of local segments of the union and political organisations, following a period of mounting class tension and struggle, the Spanish proletariat rose in armed insurrection, against the orders of their top leadership, to meet the counter-revolutionary fascist blow. These united fronts organised themselves as anti-fascist or revolutionary committees, and in the act of putting down the revolt began the long-thwarted social revolution the people so ardently desire. During and immediately after the anti-fascist insurrection they expropriated all Spain's industry, and in the subsequent months (August, September, October) by intensifying and consolidating their economic and political power, the dispersed committees laid the groundwork for a democratic mass-administered workers' state power throughout Spain.

Here was a classic example of how far the proletariat can go toward achieving its own emancipation. The trends implicit in other unsuccessful proletarian revolutions were given their fullest expression in Spain, and the result was a series of necessary but not sufficient steps toward securing workers' power. The masses showed that they had grasped the general historic truths of their epoch and of their national situation. They understood the inability of Spain's bankrupt economy to support them; they realised that the dangerous and definitive nature of Franco's counter-revolution was not to be trifled with (as their leaders were doing); and they saw the urgent necessity of united revolutionary action. But they could not achieve, untaught, the creation of a Bolshevik party.

Not only does this example of an unled spontaneous and unsuccessful social revolution show us the limits of what may be expected from spontaneous efforts of the workers: it also defines for us once again the role of the Marxian vanguard party. As the dual power developed in Spain the tasks of the party stood out clearly. The local factory and revolutionary committees lacked that overall grasp of the internal and international political situation that only Marxist theory could supply. And they were completely disoriented about the role of their own leadership — although eventually, even without a party, they caught on to this. What was needed was a nationwide organisation to bring together all their local political and economic initiatives according to a central plan for waging the civil war and developing the revolutionary economy. This very plan would have been the best agitational weapon available against the anarchist, social-democratic and Stalinist misleaders.

The other point I would like to consider in terms of the Spanish Revolution is the vitality of the workers' dual power organs, which ultimately, of course, is synonymous with the vitality of the oppressed classes that create them.

In Russia, from May, 1917, to October, the attacks against the incipient workers' power from the open and concealed counter-revolutionists met clear and forceful opposition from the Bolsheviks. This party called everything by its name, and used its entire apparatus to keep the workers informed as to who was for and who against them. By his skilful and truthful agitation, Lenin won to his party the support of a majority of the delegates to the principal soviets. His main tactic was to urge the soviets to the offensive against the counter-revolution being prepared in the government offices and foreign embassies. He succeeded, and thus the inherent vitality and recuperativeness of these basic democratic institutions were fused with a conscious leadership guiding them according to the workers' historic interests. Spain presents an enlightening case of mass democratic bodies, the committees, acting politically in a revolutionary situation, without any conscious Marxian leadership, and even without official recognition from any labour group on the scene. Counter-revolutionary attacks, such as the Russian soviets were able to weaken, abort or beat off, gathered their full force against the unauthorised Spanish committees, and beset them from every side.

Even so, the committees held out for months and were only subdued then by armed violence. More than that, as the betrayal of the reformist socialist, Stalinist and anarchist groups became clear, many of the committees, led by rank and file revolutionists, began to give battle to the official parties, and call belatedly for a return to the revolutionary road — with a sharpness that fully equalled that of Lenin. A brief survey of the development of the dual power in Spain will show how the proletariat intervened again and again through its new political bodies to impose its revolutionary will and defend the workers' power it had established.

Developments of the dual power

The anti-fascist committees in the villages proceeded, as I have said, to organise the “new revolutionary order” in both the economic and political spheres and to put into the field an army that could defeat Franco. It was natural that these provincial initiatives should begin earlier and emerge more completely than the revolutions in the big centres. This has been true of other major social revolutions, such as the Russian and the French*.

But Barcelona is the Petrograd of Spain, and there the dual power was not declared and “legalised” by the armed proletarians as it was in the provinces. True, the central Anti-Fascist Militia Committee was formed there on 21 July; but under circumstances entirely different from those surrounding the constitution of the revolutionary municipal committees. First, the Central Militia Committee (CMC) was formed only after the anarchist proletariat had subdued the fascists by three days of hard fighting, not before, to organise that fight, as was the case elsewhere. Then, it was formed by the reformist leadership, not the revolutionary workers. And lastly, its announced purpose was not to make the social revolution, but merely to continue military operations against the fascists.

Once the masses had shown their profound anti-fascist feeling by coming out into the streets in thousands, the CNT-FAI leaders stopped their futile wait for the Generality to take the initiative, and gave what leadership it could. Durruti led the mass attack on the Telefonica, Ascaso was killed in storming the Ataranzas Barracks. On Monday, when the entire city was in the hands of the men of the FAI, in a scene strikingly similar to the formation of the Central Executive of the Russian Soviets, the anarchist and bourgeois-democratic leaders set up the Central Anti-Fascist Militia Committee. Companys, the Catalan nationalist president of the Generality, told the CNT-FAI top men, “Catalonia is in your power. You can set up libertarian communism, or do whatever you want. What are you going to do?” The anarchists, like the Mensheviks, emphatically refused to accept state power, and told Companys and the Republicans to remain at the head of the state. At the President’s suggestion, the Central Committee of the Anti-Fascist Militias of Catalonia was set up to compensate for Catalonia’s lack of an army. Presumably, had the central republican government allowed Catalonia a standing army, the CNT, like the UGT, would have attempted to enlist the revolutionary proletariat into that army.

No sooner was this Central Committee set up (the CNT allowed other anti-fascist parties what it considered a proportionate representation), than all the isolated committees from villages, factories, city districts, small and large industries, began to pour their problems into its lap. The Central Committee soon became the real executive organ of the workers’ dual economic and political power at the insistence of the bottom committees. Despite the full intention of its anarchist founders not to undermine the state, the CC of the militias, was the sole power in Catalonia within two weeks after the revolution, and remained such until the anarchists dissolved it at the end of September.

Role of the Anarchists

The leadership the CNT-FAI gave to the committee consisted mainly in coordination and

centralisation of a technical, administrative and bureaucratic nature. They had no solutions for the basic economic and political problems of the committee-led revolution that they tolerated for almost three months. On the points that Lenin emphasised again and again as fundamental, they did nothing. They did not tackle the problem of the banks, the key to the economic situation. They did not smash the old state, which hung on tenaciously for its life in Madrid. They did not formulate a programme for the revolutionary conduct of the war, using the great lever for arousing the Spanish and Moroccan peoples that the social revolution offered them (i.e., propaganda for the agrarian revolution and for colonial independence).

The bankruptcy of the anarchist theoreticians in face of the serious and pressing problems of the civil war soon led to a degeneration of the military and economic situation that was marked by the slowing-up of production, and by the victories of the well organized fascist offensive. Terrified by these reverses, the CNT-FAI in September deserted the committee structure for a return to the well worn paths of class collaboration within the state. Ten weeks after its inception, the workers' dual power structure found itself disowned and leaderless.

But even the short-lived existence of the CMC had convinced the Catalan workers of its superiority over the old order, and sowed ideas in the minds of all the Spaniards that remain ineradicable to this day. The activities of the CMC were prodigious. It helped carry out many varied mass initiatives of military, economic and political character. Militias were organised and sent to the front. Conversion to war production got under way. Revolutionary order in the rear was perfected and maintained. Equal division of food supplies housing facilities, etc., was arranged. Aid was sent to the revolutionary militias in all parts of Spain.

Naturally the great strides made in Catalonia toward social equality and a democratic mass administration of the economy put fear into the hearts of the bourgeois democrats everywhere, and especially those of the government bureaucracy in Madrid. That city became the centre of the opposition to the dual power in the north. The remains of the "Spanish Republic of All Classes" were the bitterest enemy of the anti-fascist committees. And at that, Madrid itself was sharply divided by a regime of two powers, although the proletarian power never reached the strength it did elsewhere. The political situation in Madrid was extremely complex. The proletariat, UGT and CNT alike, had instituted workers' control of all industry and proclaimed the revolution. Armed socialist and anarchist militia controlled the streets while their brothers were off to fight the fascists at Toledo and in the mountains west and north of the city. In this situation every bullet or truck from worker-controlled Catalonia was potent propaganda for the dual power there, as the government well knew.

Left-wing UGT leader Caballero half-way supported the revolutionary masses in order to establish himself as the only one able to control them, and thus force his entry into the government of the republic as premier. After six weeks of manoeuvring, the republican circles shoved his rival, Prieto into second place. Caballero formed his own ministry and the Socialist Party assumed leadership of the bourgeois state. The new premier tried immediately to incorporate the socialist armed bodies into the old state apparatus. The militias resisted and, not trusting them to carry out the open war against the committees that he knew was inevitable, Caballero began reinforcing and augmenting the regular political bodies.

The Madrid government from the first refused to cooperate in any way with the Catalan Central Committee in the military prosecution of the war against Franco, or in the organisation of a worker-controlled war economy. Caballero continued this policy. This is not the place to go into the disastrous military results of this treacherous brand of “anti-fascism” which prevented the rapid and successful culmination of the bloody civil war. To make a long story short, the official representatives of the workers’ power in Catalonia, the CMC, lacking a revolutionary perspective, capitulated completely to Madrid’s blackmailing refusal to give the gold for their war industry or arms for their troops. The anarchist chiefs dissolved the central dual power body and decided to restore all authority to the Generality, which they thought they could control, in hopes of getting aid from the “anti-fascist” cabinet in Madrid.

The Dual Power Versus the Central Government

Dissolution of the new workers’ power bodies was easier to talk about than to accomplish. The FAI chiefs were confronted with the refusal of the uninvited base committees to dissolve. Instead, these groups continued their struggle for power against the republican state and added the Generality to their list of enemies. In this the ranks showed a political insight and wisdom far superior to that of their cowardly leaders. The common people knew from their own experience that the spineless bourgeois democrats were incapable of fighting fascism. And they knew that there was only one social force with sufficient vitality to do the job — the revolutionary committees. They knew, from the events of the last months that the democrats would compromise the war rather than tolerate the power of the committees over the war industry of the militias. Later events proved these calculations correct

Since the workers, especially in Catalonia, firmly resisted the demands of their leaders to surrender power back to the state, the top anarchist committees could only surrender to Madrid those organisations that they had set up as the culmination of the basic committee structure. The CMC was dissolved the last of September. The anarchists could not dissolve the thousands of local committees because they belonged to the people. So the dual power was only ended on paper: in reality the revolutionary masses held the upper hand until May, 1937, because they still had hegemony of armed power and of the economy.

The CNT-FAI gave up to the state the CMC and the control over Catalonia’s army. Until the end of the war it never got the promised arms or economic support. Catalonia’s production fell steadily until the end of the war. When the anti-fascist army did attack briefly in Aragon in the summer of 1937, it was the Stalinist troops who got the glory. All that the never-ending concessions of the CNT-FAI leadership accomplished was the strengthening of the Stalinist-Prieto reaction which was only waiting Britain’s choice of the proper moment for a compromise with Franco. The state sabotage of Catalan industry became ever more effective in proportion to the amount of power the anarchist chieftains restored to its feeble body. The dismal fruits of anarchist collaboration with the state demonstrated once again the irrefutable logic of the rank and file: If they aren’t with us, they’re against us.

The very essence of a dual power situation is its transitory and unstable character. Regulation of the numerous concrete economic and political activities of a class-divided nation cannot remain bi-

partisan, dual or neutral: control must be exercised in the interest of one class or another. Hence both classes strive to end rapidly the intolerable division of power. The situation cannot stand still. It either moves forward to complete workers' power, or backward to capitalist power exercised by the bourgeois state. Until the dissolution of the central dual power organ by the CNT-FAI, the power in Spain was increasingly exercised by the revolutionists. That act reversed the trend. From October on, the counter-revolution advanced step by step and the workers lost ground. Their defeats were not decisive, because they were still armed, but the tide of the battle went against them. The very re-constitution of anti-revolutionary groups (the old police corps, the non-revolutionary Popular Army), which was impossible at first, indicated which way the power was flowing.

Disarming the People

The first victories of the counter-revolution were minor because the proletariat retained hegemony over the decisive element of state power, armed force. Before it could consider itself sovereign in anti-fascist Spain, the reformist-led state had to disarm the people. And it set this as its main task, hiding its true purpose under such phrases as "the need for restoring public order" and "eliminating the fifth columnists in the rear guard."

From September on, the committees and the state were locked in struggle. The consequent disorganisation resulted in an uninterrupted fascist advance on Madrid, after the early period of proletarian victories. The "Loyalist Government" refused absolutely to improvise militarily or economically on the basis of the social revolution already effected, and it accomplished nothing. The proletarian militias ran out of arms; the worker-controlled economy needed credits, machinery and raw materials before it could supply the militias. The state controlled the Bank of Spain and the gold reserves, and refused the revolutionists everything. Result: the fascists advanced. Caballero tried to recruit the workers' militia into the regular army with no success: they had their own army and didn't want another. He bought a few planes and arms from Russia. After two months of doing nothing in Madrid, the government deserted that capital for Valencia. In this sanctuary, removed from the pressing threat of the fascist advance' the state concentrated on rebuilding its bureaucracy, recruiting police and regaining enough strength to attack the committee structure. The state's undivided attention to this matter was rewarded by a constant increase in its power to the detriment of the leaderless and disorganised committees, and by a steady series of military defeats for the anti-fascists at the hands of the rebels.

Madrid was saved by the revolutionary anti-fascists, not by the Popular Front government, which gave it up for lost on 6 November. In the crucial months of November and December the anti-fascist committees bent every effort to support Madrid. Some 10,000 militias (excluding the 2,000 International Brigaders) were rushed to the city from Aragon, Catalonia, Levant and other provinces. Convoys of food and clothing were sent from the committees of many different regions. Some day the tremendous gestures of the village communes and factory committees to aid Madrid will be fittingly recorded.

Meanwhile, the control committees of the Catalan industries became more and more impatient with the central government's sabotage of production, and the counsels of tolerance for the counter-revolution that they heard from their union chiefs. In November, anti-Stalinist feeling ran high as the proletarian revolutionists realised the criminal role of these traitors to the socialist movement.

Unrest within the CNT (into which were organised the decisive sections of the Spanish proletariat) mounted steadily. Many militants turned against the reformist leadership, but they were without a programme of their own.

Assaults on Peasant Committees

The power of the “Loyalist Government” increased. In December it felt itself strong enough, thanks to the anarchist and socialist participation, to launch a series of armed assaults against the weakest of the peasant committees, those of Levant and Castille. Newly recruited police broke up the headquarters of the anarchist unions of poor peasants, killing or disarming and jailing the militants. The Communist Party was in the vanguard of this counter-revolutionary attack. The committees fought back, and in some places declared armed mobilisations against the police. This internal warfare lasted until March, 1937, but always outside of Catalonia, where the workers’ power was still too strong and the state too weak for an open attack.

The CNT-FAI leaders completely disowned the committees, and joined the state in declaring the mobilisations illegal, undisciplined, and all the rest of it. The revolutionary peasants fought their battle against the police alone, with no help from the increasingly dissatisfied city workers. The leading CNT committees censored all news of the events from their press, while the socialists said the state was putting down “concealed fifth columnists”. The result was that the revolutionary vanguard of poor peasants was disarmed, jailed or murdered, and their claims to communal ownership of the land declared invalid. But collective exploitation of the land continued in anti-fascist Spain until the end of the war in 1937. It even survived the criminal burning and destruction of the collectives by the Stalinist Lister Brigade and the remains of the International Brigade in 1937. In actual fact, the agrarian revolution in Spain was accomplished, and no disarming or killing of a few peasant leaders could change that. But, the proletarian revolution was the only guarantee of the peasant revolution. When the city workers failed to organize a workers’ state to consolidate their power, the peasant collectives were doomed.

As a direct result of the Loyalist Government’s prior concern with breaking workers’ power behind the lines, Malaga fell to the fascists on 10 February. Behind this tragedy lay a sorry tale of government refusal to supply munitions to the revolutionary Andalusian militias, of treason by the Popular Army officials and Stalinist political commissars at Malaga. The workers were willing to fight to the end: the People’s Front government to which their leaders had entrusted the conduct of the war made this impossible.

The loss of Malaga confirmed the worst fears of the independent committees and aroused them to renewed action. Lacking a Bolshevik Party to show them the exact steps for ridding themselves of their misleaders, the committees raised all kinds of varied and impossible slogans against the government. Meanwhile, their official leaders continued to assume responsibility for its acts. The CNT ministers chose this juncture to enter into close and intimate collaboration with Caballero. Local groups everywhere, and especially in Catalonia, demanded a general mobilisation of manpower and economic resources for an all-out offensive against the fascists. This was a fantastic request to address to the Caballero government, for above all things it feared a renewal of the mass action such a mobilisation would inevitably entail. And that was just what the ranks wanted: a revival of the widespread and highly effective direct action of July. They understood that only by

drawing on the still unexhausted reserves of popular heroism, sacrifice and courage would fascism be stopped.

Caballero was sold completely on the idea of a non-revolutionary anti-fascist war; and he knew that he could never carry out this dream if he allowed the extremely revolutionary anti-fascist masses any direct participation. Hence the People's Front state answered the rising tide of mass demands for action by asserting that it alone was capable of organising the war, by calling for All power to the government and, more important still, All arms to the front. The democratic defenders of the capitalist regime knew well enough that the best defense is an offense, and renewed their slanderous attacks against the "uncontrollable" committees.

At this point, after five months of a losing war, there was an important change in the orientation of the revolutionary committees. They began to address themselves directly to the people instead of pleading further with their reformist anarchist leaders. The rank and file not only laid the firm foundations of a workers' state, and forced the CMC to execute its will for a time, but it also proved able to recognise its reformist leaders as betrayers of the revolution, and turned against them.

Th. Dual Power Struggle in Catalonia

This realisation of the role of their leaders, which was confirmed conclusively by the military defeats, had first risen because of internal Catalan developments. On 11 October, after having dissolved the CMC, the Generality ordered the dissolution of "all the other organs born from the Revolution," and their replacement by municipal coalition councils in its own image. This measure restored courage to bourgeois politicians and non-labour elements who tried to stage a comeback in mid-October. The revolutionary municipalities soon stopped that and set up city councils that they could control. This experience started the turn against the CNT's policy of collaboration.

In Barcelona itself the main repository of workers' power was not the city government, but the workers' police. These "patrols of control," as they were called, obeyed only the orders and slogans of the factory committees, the unions, food supply committees, etc. Even after the CNT entered the Generality government, the patrols would not follow its orders if they conflicted with those of the revolutionary organisations, as those coming from the Stalinist departments invariably did. For this reason the state concentrated its attack in the capital against the workers' police. The Stalinists and Catalan nationalists inside the coalition cabinet began agitating for a "restoration of order" and a dissolution of the patrols in November. The CNT, backed by the POUM, resisted. In December the Stalinists forced the expulsion of the POUM from the government as the price of continued Russian aid; and in January the CNT-FAI capitulated to the reaction and agreed to reorganize public order. Still the government police did not dare show themselves on the streets. The uninterrupted series of capitulations by the anarchist leaders, resulting in the surrender of many strategic positions of the dual power organs, did not prevent them from retaining control of these same committees up through February.

The mere existence of soviets was no guarantee of victory for the workers' cause. Without democracy for the soviets to exist, without democracy within them, and without a resolute Bolshevik Party bent on exercising this democracy, it was impossible for the workers to advance

along the road to power. For seven months, until the proletarian ranks themselves became disillusioned with the anarchist slogans of defeat, the committees blindly followed the FAI. True there were other political groups within the committees, but their democratic rights were not secure (due to notorious CNT strong-arm methods) and they did not have the firm revolutionary line necessary to win the ranks away from the syndicalists. There were POUMists and UGTists (i.e., Stalinists) in most of the municipal committees, factory committees, and workers' patrols of Catalonia, but the majority was usually anarchist. The Stalinists soon withdrew, leaving the POUM as the main opposition group. But the POUM would not oppose the CNT-FAI top committees publicly: if it could not convince them peaceably it gave up and went along with FAI policy of cooperation with the state.

Hence the committees were limited to a purely negative, defensive role in a situation that could only go forward, or back, and could in no case stand still. Since the committees did not act, the counter-revolution advanced, and when they finally reacted spontaneously, it was too late. After February, groups everywhere began to call the Loyalist government counter-revolutionary, but they had no positive program of workers' power to oppose to it.

The Workers' Patrols

In Barcelona events took a slightly different turn. Between January and May the top anarchist bureaucrats agreed half a dozen times to dissolve the workers' patrols. Even Dionisio Eroles, the FAI militant, who had created them and called them "the best guarantee of the brutal defeat of the bourgeois dogs," urged his men to surrender their guns to the old police. In the patrols was a strong group of POUMists who, after their party had been severely kicked around by the CNT and the Stalinists, finally came out with a strong and open position against the official anarchist line. They issued a manifesto in February urging the men of the FAI to refuse to disband it. The idea had an enthusiastic reception because it exactly expressed the sentiments of the anarchist patrol members. The patrols refused to dissolve, forced the Generality into a six-week crisis over "public order" and so brought the issue of armed superiority into the streets in the last weeks of April. Thus, the first approximation of the Bolshevik tactics of struggle within the workers' organs to strengthen them, and dominate them, brought immediate success to the POUM and led to an intensification and deepening of the dual-power struggle in Catalonia. But the POUM did not know what to do with its success, since it was not oriented toward a proletarian seizure of power. When the issue came to a head in May, Nin etc urged the workers to stay home and not to try to seize and hold the power.

The case of the patrols was exceptional. Most of the anticollaboration sentiment in the proletarian ranks developed independently of the POUM, which was not really against collaboration in the first place. The POUM remained isolated from this development for two reasons:

- (1) it avoided open mass agitation against the all-powerful CNT for fear of reprisals and
- (2) it had no clear program of workers' power to oppose to the anarchist program of class collaboration. This failure of the one self-proclaimed Marxist party to supply the leaders of the dual power organs with a clear picture of the road to power led different groups and localities to adopt a number of half-way and transitional demands aimed at stopping the counter-revolution. In the

course of their struggle to put over these demands, ever larger segments of the CNT lost confidence in the possibility of reforming their leaders. In March the situation had reached a point where only the organization of a workers' state to crush the old state could stop the counter-revolution.

Despite their lack of understanding of the way to resolve the crucial problem of state power, there was one elementary measure that the Catalan proletariat could and did take. Through their municipal organs, and in Barcelona through a network of more highly specialized committees, they refused to surrender the basic sources of their power — their arms and their factories. In the northern part of Catalonia, the local committees even banded together for defensive action against the counter-revolutionary state. It had taken this state ten months to regain enough strength to test its power against that of the social revolution in Catalonia; the renewed aggressiveness of the revolutionists, and their open attacks on the “counter-revolution in high places” hastened the showdown.

Why Dual Power Lasted

There were several factors responsible for the fact that the dual power in Catalonia (and to a lesser extent in other parts of Spain) was able to last for ten long months without either side winning decisive control of the situation. One factor was the absolute bankruptcy of the labour leadership, which could not control its membership well enough to stop the revolution, and could only sabotage it by refusing to organise it nationally. Another was the clever role played by Great Britain, which had learned from two decades of indecisive class struggles the internal weakness of proletarian movements which lack a convinced Bolshevik leadership. The bourgeoisie forgets nothing: Britain held back from open intervention against the workers' power for a policy of boring from within the reformist organisations, i.e., buying off the leadership.

In the confusion of a two-power regime, given the absence of a determined Bolshevik Party, and given the tremendous power exercised over Spain's internal economy by the policy of embargo and blockade, the Foreign Office counted on a gradual dissipation of workers' power, and the concentration of all authority back in the hands of the old state. The presence of strong labour movements in Britain and France also helped to prevent direct military intervention against the workers' power. A more determined proletarian revolution would have merited direct military intervention by the democracies, as was the case in Russia in 1917. Britain's desperate pre-war manoeuvring to keep the balance of power on the continent added to her desire to avoid open conflict with the Nazis and Italians over Spain.

Thus the workers' power in Spain, although never crystallised into a workers' state, was able to last ten months because of a unique international situation, its own organisational weakness at the top, and because the social revolution to which it gave expression was so profound and so inevitable under Spanish conditions that it took the internal counter-revolutionists that long to demoralise it, and non-labour elements for a frontal assault on it.

Without the Stalinists, it is doubtful if the counter-revolution would have been well enough organised to defeat even the uncentralised, isolated workers' power organ, and it is quite possible that Prieto would eventually have called for open British military support against the anarchist

proletariat. Unfortunately, the Stalinists were there, and directed the seizure of position after position from the leaderless revolutionary proletariat. Their first victories were only on paper. Then came the day when they were prepared to contest for armed superiority with the Catalan workers, which struggle determined the fate of the more primitive dual power organs in the rest of anti-fascist Spain.

It is significant that when this showdown finally came, in May, 1937, the committee rose to meet the Stalinist provocation by asserting their complete mastery of Barcelona and most of Catalonia. The District Defence Committees of the FAI, the POUM locals, and armed unionists controlled Barcelona completely. The cannons of Montjuich fortress could have smashed to bits the main opposition focus, the Generality buildings, at a word from the CNT Regional Committee. But the armed superiority of the proletariat, and the final impressive demonstration of its power, availed absolutely nothing because they lacked a Bolshevik Party to apply this power at the crucial point, the conquest of state power.

The CNT-FAI leaders refused rank and file requests to organise a fight against the state to seize power. They insisted that the workers leave the streets and go home. For four long days the bottom committees of the CNT and FAI refused to obey their leaders and insisted on fulfilling their original program of disarming the police. Only the lack of a functioning organisation to coordinate their activities prevented the district defence committees from assaulting the government buildings and seizing power. The organisation could have been small, but with a correct understanding of the situation only an indispensable minimum of facilities (autos, printing press, paper, guns and agitators) would have been required to turn the May Day armed insurrection into a successful proletarian revolution. But that organisation was lacking, and the counter-revolution triumphed. And, as the Fourth International predicted, proved itself absolutely incapable of bringing the anti-fascist war to a victorious end. Negrin paved the way for Franco.

Role of the Fourth International

Why were the Trotskyists unable to create a functioning revolutionary party in Spain? As I have shown, endless opportunities were opened up to them by the objective situation, especially by the continued struggle of the committees to retain their power after all the official parties had disowned them, and by the realisation of the vanguard “where the counter-revolution lay.” The answer to this question can be summed up: the Fourth Internationalists missed these opportunities because they were few, financially weak, foreigners, and at the front. Shortly before the May Days, and especially afterward, they began to grow in numbers. But it was too late for the success of the first Spanish revolution, because of the previous victory of the Stalinist counter-revolution, and — the liquidation of the civil war shortly after in 1939. The growth of the Spanish Trotskyists in those last bitter days of an illegal underground struggle is indicative of the future: only the Fourth Internationalists emerged from that tragic series of betrayals and defeats with an unsullied banner.

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