

Spain 1934-39

**From
Working Class Struggle**



**to
Imperialist War**

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Front cover:
Barcelona, May 1937 workers start to erect barricades against the Stalinist takeover

Preamble

Three quarters of a century after it began on 18 July 1936 the Spanish Civil War still has a resonance for many as “the last great cause” worth fighting for. To mark this latest anniversary we are reprinting documents we wrote to commemorate various episodes of the struggle of Spanish workers in the 1930s. These appeared in *Workers Voice*, *Revolutionary Perspectives and Internationalist Communist* over the years and the majority of them have been out of print for a long time. We have not edited them but present them as they were originally written (indeed some are facsimiles). This has the disadvantage that the same arguments are repeated in some documents but in each case they relate to different events and different themes which we think deepens the point being made. These are not abstract discussions but relate directly to how we face the issues of war and revolution today.

The first and most obvious is our understanding of what “anti-fascism” meant in late 1930s Europe. Some have misunderstood our position in the past. It doesn’t imply indifference or passivity in the face of fascist attacks (our ancestors who founded the Communist Party of Italy in 1921 were after all amongst the strongest enemies and the first victims of fascism). Fascism was simply the policy adopted by some sections of the capitalist class in those imperialist countries most disadvantaged by the outcome of the First World War (especially Germany and Italy). To many of the capitalist class in Europe fascism was also useful in suppressing an increasingly revolutionary working class. Such wonderful democrats as the Fabian, George Bernard Shaw or Winston Churchill praised Mussolini for “taming the bestial appetites of Bolshevism”. However we don’t consider fascism differently from other factions of the capitalist class. To do so means to exhibit a preference for one capitalist solution, “democracy”, over another. But in the 1930s the issue was even darker as imperialist war was already on the agenda.

After the rise of the Nazis in Germany “anti-fascism” and the Popular Front became the slogan of imperialist mobilisation. It was first articulated in the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935 and became the lynchpin of Soviet imperialism’s foreign policy. In 1936 “anti-fascism” and calls for Popular Fronts with all capitalist parties were part of a cynical Stalinist policy to win the democracies over to the fight against the Axis Powers. It became the battle cry of all bourgeois factions defending the Spanish Republic and led to the formation of the Popular Front Government of February 1936. It was this government that Franco tried to overthrow in a military coup in July 1936. He failed due to a spontaneous rising of the working class throughout Spain. It not only led to the failure of the coup but posed a question for those in Spain who had long called for social revolution. All of them failed the test. For the Socialist Party leaders, already comfortable in their ministerial armchairs, arming the masses was only

carried out reluctantly as they preferred the defence of bourgeois democracy to workers’ revolution. It was not so obvious that the anarchists of the CNT-FAI would do the same. The answer was to come all too soon. By accepting the primacy of the anti-fascist struggle the anarchists undermined the incipient revolution which had broken out in town and country and gradually (however unwillingly) colluded in its suppression. This was to eventually pave the way for the Stalinist takeover of the Republican cause and to the very defeat which those who had sacrificed their ideas of social revolution had feared. In short, none of the participating currents emerged from the Spanish tragedy smelling of roses. In analysing this we are not making immediate polemical points but trying to make the experience part of our understanding of how to achieve a classless, stateless, moneyless society of freely associated producers.

Our view is not some abstract critique based on the benefit of hindsight but on what our ancestors in the International Communist Left maintained in their journals *Bilan* and *Octobre* at the time. They saw that the revolutionary potential in Spain had quickly been subsumed by the anti-fascist (i.e. pro democracy) struggle. Some of their writings are published towards the end of this pamphlet as evidence of their foresight and clarity. The International Bureau which they set up in 1938 was the inspiration for our own International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party of the 1980s. Today the IBRP (referred to in some of the documents) has become the Internationalist Communist Tendency.

The two great proletarian events of the Twentieth century both ended in crushing defeats for the working class. In both Russia and Spain, for different reasons, the struggle was confined to a single country. Whereas in Russia the overthrow of the capitalist government opened up the prospect of world revolution the struggle in Spain came when that prospect had already vanished. Spain’s history had taken a rather different trajectory to the rest of Europe as its bourgeoisie had benefitted from not participating in the imperialist slaughter of World War One. It also meant that its social democrats were not revealed as class collaborators and even the CNT had not been put to the test. What the early weeks of the Spanish Civil War, and the Russian Revolution in its earliest years, both gave us was an idea of what ordinary working people could achieve. This is inspiring but it is an inspiration that has to be critically examined and re-examined to draw from those experiences a guide for our actions as a class in the future. Unless, that is, we prefer to keep recording more working class “tragedies”.

**Communist Workers’ Organisation
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Note: For newcomers to this issue there is a glossary of the main organisations on p.12 and a brief timeline on p. 4

In Commemoration of the Asturias Soviet

From Workers Voice 19 Nov/Dec 1984

The First World War which began in 1914 exposed the capitalist nature of the so-called "socialist" parties of Europe as they rushed to find reasons why workers should kill each other in defence of their "own" imperialist masters. However the Spanish state managed to avoid entering this conflict and thus the Spanish Socialist Party (the PSOE) and the anarcho-syndicalist movement (CNT) were not revealed as anti-proletarian bodies. In the case of the PSOE they showed their reactionary nature when they collaborated with the military dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera (under whom the PSOE leader became Minister of Labour) and after they had formed an alliance with the parties of the leaders of Spanish capitalism (the second ranked Socialist, Prieto, was himself a millionaire) to form the Spanish Republic in 1931. But even when they were in power and called out troops to massacre a pathetic millenarian uprising by destitute anarchist labourers as Casa Viejas in 1933 they kept their working class base. In Spain, as elsewhere, workers' illusions in the old parties remained. Casas Viejas led to the collapse of the first coalition government of the Republic and the PSOE, like all labour parties in opposition, tried to control its working class base by becoming more radical in its rhetoric. During 1934 the PSOE founded "workers' alliances" with other left-wing organisations in an attempt to blot out the memory of its record in government. The highpoint of these radical words came when the CEDA, a right-wing party which had not taken an oath of allegiance to the Spanish Republic, looked as though it might get into the government. Largo Caballero, the PSOE leader, now threatened an insurrection if this did happen. But the Workers Alliance did nothing to prepare for an armed struggle. No arms were distributed, no militias formed and no plans for fraternisation with the "quintas" or conscripts were made. Thus when the CEDA did enter the government the bluff of the PSOE was called. Largo Caballero called a general strike but generously allowed the government 24 hours to prepare. However, the Madrid working class took to the streets immediately on the same day, hoping that the PSOE's vague promises of arms

would be fulfilled. By 12 October the Spanish capital had been paralysed for eight days but the PSOE had still done nothing. On 13 October they called for a return to work claiming a victory (all that had happened in Madrid was the arrest of Largo Caballero). And in Barcelona the CNT did little more despite the fact that the workers had spontaneously raised barricades in the streets. For the anarchists this was just a political struggle and nothing to do with them. In this fashion the CNT also played its part in isolating the Asturian workers.

The Asturian Soviet

Only in Asturias where the control of the so-called political leaders of the working class wasn't so strong did the combativity of the workers find real expression. Armed at first only with sticks of dynamite the miners of this Northern region captured the barracks of the Civil Guard (the armed police) and distributed their arms. Taking as their slogan UHP, which means United Proletarian Brothers, workers of all political factions soon conquered all the mining villages, seizing 30,000 rifles in the process. In one place, La Felguera, the miners even built armoured cars and bomb-throwing machines to make up for the shortage of rifles and ammunition. With these the whole of Asturias, including the main port of Oviedo, fell to the miners by 7 October.

It was a genuine proletarian movement which went beyond the bourgeois manoeuvres of the PSOE.

Through its very movement, the action of the proletariat destroyed the State institutions and capitalist ownership. Power was based on local workers' committees, with the aid of the armed proletariat, and ownership was generally redistributed without any kind of formalities. G Munis 'Jalones de derrota: promesa de victoria' p.157 [CWO translation]

Unable to use the conscripts of the Spanish regular army, the Madrid Government resorted to a

40,000 strong force of Franco's Foreign Legion and Moorish Troops. Despite its artillery and brutality (all prisoners were shot on capture) this force could only make rapid progress in the coastal areas. In the mountain passes of Asturias the miners held firm.

And just as the Socialist leaders in Madrid were betraying the struggle they had called for, so too did the Asturian socialist deputies desert the working class. Having learned from Madrid that there would be no general rising, these socialists quickly told the Asturian workers to lay down their arms and then escaped, leaving the workers to their fate. The workers, however, re-elected their revolutionary committees which were now "made up of the most advanced of the Asturian proletariat" (Munis) instead of the Socialist time servers. The unequal struggle between the miners and Franco's troops lasted another week until the miners began to run out of ammunition and it became clear to the workers

that nowhere else in Spain had other workers imitated their actions. In the face of this isolation the delegates of the Provincial Committee of the Asturian workers signed a truce with the local army commander Lopez Ochoa. Despite this agreement the revenge wreaked by the "army of order" in Asturias was amongst the most barbaric in a decade of barbarous acts.

The agreement between Lopez Ochoa and the Provincial Committee by which he first promised to occupy the mining districts with the Moorish regulars and the Foreign Legion in the rearguard was formally respected but the atrocities went on increasing day by day. The Civil Guard added its contribution by carrying out assassinations en masse. Just as in the Middle Ages military leaders allowed their mercenary troops the right of sack in cities which resisted, so the reaction allowed its mercenaries free rein to pillage, right of assassination, and including the right of violation. Whole families, from the new-born to grandparents we completely exterminated. An infinity of men were tortured and beaten to death by the "army of order". Hundreds were

murdered and clandestinely buried.[ibid]

In all nearly 5,000 workers were murdered and a further 30,000 were imprisoned and tortured. The PSOE leaders were soon amnestied but Largo Caballero's false reputation as "the Spanish Lenin" was fabricated when he was given a 30 year prison sentence that he was never expected to serve.

Until the final victory of the international socialist revolution all struggles of the working class are

in some sense or other defeats but the defeat of the Asturian miners went beyond the physical slaughter of the workers.

Had the crushing of the Asturian October led to the political exposure of the anti-revolutionary character of the PSOE, CNT and also the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) then the dead would not have died in vain. Unfortunately the events not only gave the PSOE

leaders the undeserved crowns of martyrs but even saw the beginnings of the formation of the Popular Front government that was elected in February 1936. What had been a workers alliance aimed at setting up a soviet republic in 1934 now became part of the policy of Soviet imperialism which, in its aim to get an alliance with Britain and France, called upon workers to "defend democracy from the fascist menace". Thus the Asturian miners of 1934 who had fought against the capitalist Republic found themselves in 1936 taking up arms again — this time in its defence! Defence of democracy replaced the struggle for socialism and in this sense the Spanish Civil War from 1936-39 became a dress rehearsal for the 2nd World War since "defence of democracy" was what the anti-Hitler alliance of Britain, Russia and the USA also used to win the workers to another imperialist butchery from 1939-45.

Today the working class throughout the world is not under the direction of false socialist leaders as it was in 1914 or 1934. But neither has it found its own expression of its growing awareness of the bankruptcy of capital. And the chief lesson of Asturias is that without an independent



UHP — Unite Proletarian Brothers — the proletarian slogan of 1934 had become by 1937 the slogan of the bourgeois republic

proletarian organisation workers can be led into a struggle in which, despite their heroism and capacity for self-organisation, they cannot escape from the alternatives of bourgeois politics. Such an organisation, in 1934, would have based its perspectives on the bourgeois political crisis which existed and put forward a **proletarian** response. This would have been to expose both the “anti-fascism” of the PSOE and the non-political abstentionism of the CNT, and to have called for solidarity action for all Spanish workers with those of Asturias. Communists do not ignore the political crises of the bourgeoisie such as that which preceded Asturias, nor do they turn their backs on movements which begin with the working class under the domination of bourgeois forces. On the contrary they **use** the space opened up by these crises and movements to mobilise for a

genuine class response and the **transformation** of the movement into an anti-capitalist one. Asturias '34 shows, on a small scale, that this is possible, given a communist presence in the working class.

In the 1930s the workers in Spain were isolated from the rest of the working class in Europe which had been physically crushed in its great struggles of the previous decade. Today, from Poland to Peru, the international working class is beginning to break from the long nightmare of those defeats and it is beginning to create genuine communist organisations all over the world. The international unification of those forces and their increasing influence within the working class are essential if bourgeois ideology in its thousand forms is to be crushed. Only thus can the glorious future glimpsed by the Asturian miners be turned into reality.

Selective Timeline

- 1914-18** First World War. The Spanish capitalist class stay out of the war and capitalism develops rapidly in Spain as does the size of the working class.
- 1917** The Russian Revolution breaks out inspiring a revolutionary wave throughout the world. By 1921 the revolution is in isolation and full retreat and its last gasp is in China in 1927.
- 1923** Failure in the colonial war against Morocco leads to the monarchy accepting the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera. Largo Caballero leader of the PSOE and the UGT trades unions becomes a councillor of state.
- 1927** Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) founded.
- 1929** The Wall St Crash plunges Spain into crisis.
- 1930** Fall of Primo de Rivera.
- 1931** The monarchy of Alfonso XIII is overthrown and replaced by the Second Republic.
- 1932** Catalan Autonomy Statute passed setting up the Generalitat.
- 1933** *January* Massacre of anarchist labourers at Casas Viejas in Andalucia.
Nazis come to power in Germany.
November the Right win elections to the Spanish Cortes as many workers abstain.
- 1934** Asturias workers rising brutally crushed by the Army of Africa headed by Franco.
- 1935** *July* 7th Comintern Congress calls on Communist Parties to support Popular Front governments even with “progressive capitalist” parties.
French left form Popular Front under Leon Blum in *November*.
- 1936** *February* Popular Front government elected in Spain.
June Blum’s Popular Front elected in France.
July Franco’s “pronunciamiento” leads to popular resistance throughout Spain but due to the failure of the Popular Front government to arm the workers he gains control of half of Spain. The civil war begins.
August France and Britain sign pact of non-intervention in Spain.
September Largo Caballero made Prime Minister insisting that the Communist Party joins the government. The CNT and POUM join Catalan Government (Generalitat).
October The militias disbanded in favour of unified military command on the Republican side.
November Anarchists join central government in Madrid.
December POUM expelled from Government under pressure from Spanish Communist Party.
- 1937** *May* Communist Party attempt to evict CNT from the Barcelona Telephone exchange leads to May Days. Largo Caballero replaced as PM by the more pliant PCE stooge, Juan Negrin.
June POUM outlawed and the Stalinist repression in Spain is unleashed in earnest.
- 1938** *June* Franco reaches Catalan coast thus cutting Republican Spain in two.
- 1939** *February* France and Britain recognise Franco as legitimate ruler of Spain although he only controls two thirds of the territory.
March The Second Republic falls.
August The Nazi-Soviet Pact leads to the invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War Two.

Spain 1936: Leftist Legend and Workers Reality

From Revolutionary Perspectives 3 (Series 3) Summer 1996

Every leftist tendency, from the Stalinists, Trotskyists and social democrats to the anarchists has its own mythology about Spain during the thirties. Though there is no great agreement amongst them 'Spain' provides an opportunity for many to theorise and mythologise in a grand way about 'revolution', fascism and anti-fascism, and about the values of bourgeois democracy. None of them, however, provide the clarity shown at the time by the analyses published in the press of the communist left, in particular *Bilan*, the magazine in French of the fraction of the communist left in exile, and *Prometeo*, the magazine in Italian of the left fraction of the Communist Party of Italy. The Thirties were years of profound proletarian defeat and there was no way this minority of revolutionaries could provide a magical answer to turn the material situation around for the working class and bring significant sections behind the principles of communism. (Although a minority of them went to Spain imagining that this was possible, their subsequent fate only proved the practical correctness of the majority.) The lasting contribution of the Communist Left, however, is that they consistently held out a class analysis, defending communist principles against opportunists and all those who would bring the working class under the umbrella of anti-fascism and democracy, slogans which they recognised at the time were geared to undermine workers' own independent struggle and instead mobilise them behind a section of the bourgeoisie.

Background

Spain had a somewhat different rhythm of history to the rest of Europe. Of the major European nations it alone had not entered the First World War, its bourgeoisie not being able to decide which side to join. Instead it enjoyed a minor boom by selling its wares to both the Entente and the Central Powers. That war allowed Spain to develop its economy. Before 1914 the other major powers had been in a position to block Spain's entry into the wider European and world markets and there had been

little chance for Spanish capital to develop its mining and industrial potential. The First World War also saw a large increase in the Spanish working class — and so too in its struggle against the appalling conditions of exploitation. This culminated in the general strike of 1917 where workers were machine gunned by the army, 70 dying and hundreds being wounded. It was a foretaste of the confused convulsions of Spain in the thirties since the Government provoked the strike and the workers were not just fighting for their own cause but also partially supporting a demand for a bourgeois parliament. After the prosperity of the First World War a relative decline set in. Although supported by an influx of foreign capital into mining, heavy industry and the infrastructure (in particular the telephone system), the burgeoning crisis of the inter-war years fell heavily on Spanish capital. The Spanish bourgeoisie began more and more to diverge between the arch conservatives based around the large and inefficient estates of the south and the rising industrial capitalists of the eastern seaboard and the north. In amongst all of this the working class suffered terribly from the extremes of poverty. Rural workers were unemployed for long periods, often starving, whilst underemployment was the norm for industrial workers in the cities.

The republic ("a rebellion on the part of industrial interests in Spain against government by landowners" — Gerald Brenan) was declared in 1931 after the period of the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera. He had ruled using a combination of repression, keeping workers' organisations illegal, and cooption, using social democratic ministers and various 'benefits' for workers. Eventually, though, he could stem the tide of the crisis no longer and left, closely followed by the king. What followed were governments of both left and right, both repressive of any movement which attempted to act on economic or political demands posed by organisations of workers. 1933 witnessed risings in Casas Viejas and Arnedo declaring for the anarchist ideal of 'libertarian communism', both brutally put down by troops. In 1934, as part of the manoeuvres of the left wing of capital personified by the leader of the socialists, Largo Caballero,⁽¹⁾ the Asturias, a northern region of mining and heavy industry rose in insurrection. The heroism of the miners was mirrored by the speed of retreat of the leaders of the left. However, it was not a prototypical attempt at revolution. Rather than the stuff of legend as many would have us believe, it was a lesson in how to have workers slaughtered on the altar of the ambitions of the capitalist left. The 'Workers'

Alliance' of the Asturias rising was the first step on the road to the Popular Front of 1936. By February 1936 Spain had another leftist government. The 'Popular Front' gained office through the grace and favour of the CNT (see the glossary at the end). This largely anarcho-sindicalist union did not call for its customary abstention at the polls, thus Cenetistas (CNT militants) were able to lend their electoral weight to return a left government.



The turning point of the revolution. Men and women of the Peoples' militias going off to fight the fascists ... and abandoning their strikes against the bourgeoisie in the cities.

We gave power to the left parties, convinced that in the circumstances, they represented a lesser evil. (Diego Abad de Santillan, FAI leader, militia commander, minister in the Catalan government, *Por qué Perdimos la Guerra*, 1940)

For years the Spanish working class had been thoroughly infused with either the glories of 'democracy' and social democracy or the millenarian suicidalism and confused reformism of the anarchists. For all their so-called abstentionism, the anarchists had played with the electoral system, openly calling for either a vote or abstention depending upon the thinking of the leadership of the CNT and FAI. The election victories of the left government of 1931 and then the right government of 1933 were a direct result of their intervention. (Peiró and Peirats, anarchist leaders, both bearing witness to behind the scenes negotiations between 'antipolitical' anarchists and leaders of left parties.) For its part the PCE, the Spanish Communist Party numbered only around 30,000 throughout all of Spain in 1936 and was recognised as the most slavish to Moscow, even in the Comintern itself,⁽²⁾ It was to fit in well with the Stalinist defence of the interests of the USSR as an imperialist player. It certainly had not busied itself with any preparation within the working class for the conquest of power,

not even with the barest notion of a revolutionary programme.

The Popular Front

Far from being a victory, enrolment within the Popular Front alongside the supporters of bourgeois democracy was another step in the defeat of the working class. From the so-called

'radicalised' parties of democracy, the anarchists, the socialists, the 'left socialists', to the Stalinised social democrats, the pursuit of the holy grail of democracy (or variously the social revolution) against the rise of 'fascism' was the landscape on which the coming imperialist war was to be set. The second cycle of capitalist accumulation this century had faltered. The only hope for capital was to be the destruction visited by the coming war, the huge production of arms by the fast hardening imperialist blocs, and so the slaughter and further defeat of the international working class. The agenda for the left, however, was to rush headlong into the arms of the bourgeoisie and pursue variations of the united front policy as in the Popular Front in both Spain and France. The Stalinists and Trotskyists both agreed with this policy to a greater or lesser extent, the Comintern actually framing it at its 1935 Seventh Congress. Its aim was nothing to do with revolution but was a means to ensure its own position within a rapidly forming series of imperialist blocs. In 1934 the USSR had entered what Lenin had called "the robbers' League", the League of Nations, so openly announcing its membership of the roll of imperialist states. In 1935 the Comintern had overseen the rapprochement between the French socialist and communist parties against the backdrop of the rise of the French rightist organisations, the Croix de Feu, Solidarité Française, Jeunesse Patriotes, Action

Française. This was the model for Spain. The Spanish right was officially but inaccurately dubbed “fascist”. Franco’s pronunciamiento of July 1936 was more a traditional military coup than a fascist plot. The real fascist organisation, the Falange, with its blue-shirted thugs, was absorbed into Franco’s rightist morass and told to shut up.

As Abad de Santillan was to say, the new left government did not fulfil the hopes workers had of it. Just as the Blum Popular Front government in France had failed to do.

The left-wing parties having been returned to Power, thanks to us, we then watched them carry on with that same lack of understanding and the same blindness towards us. Neither the workers in industry nor the peasants had any reason to feel more satisfied than before. The real power remained in the hands of a rebellious capitalism, of the church and the military caste. (op. cit.)

Despite the obvious, that the right was preparing for war, the Minister of War dismissed all such notions as ‘rumours’, as ‘false and without foundation’, calculated to foment

*public anxiety, to sow ill-feeling against the military and to undermine, if not destroy, the discipline which is fundamental to the Army. The minister... is honoured to be able to declare publicly that all ranks of the Spanish Army, from the highest to the lowest are keeping within the limits of strictest discipline. (quoted in V. Richards, *The Lessons of the Spanish Revolution*)*

By July 19 the Republic was at war, the army split between pro- and anti-republicans, the left seeking weapons for its militants. Between February and July there had been 113 general strikes and 228 local strikes. Many were injured and killed in this period of unrest. By July the prisons were filled with workers from these actions.

With the Spanish Popular Front under attack the Blum government of France, the other Popular Front, bit its collective lip. It had hoped to send arms to aid the republican defence but it backed down under the influence of the British and of the ‘radicals’ in the French Popular Front. The USSR, however, soon began the supply of arms through the PCE, which was to gain huge influence and grow inestimably as it controlled that flow and the military machinery associated with it. Franco, once landed from Morocco at the head of the Foreign Legion of Moroccan troops and other elements of

the Spanish Army, was soon supplied and assisted by the Germans and Italians. The Italians in particular sent over 50,000 troops and huge quantities of equipment in a failed attempt to begin an Italian-led Mediterranean bloc.

The legend of the left about the first shots of the war would have us believe that it was workers seizing arms from garrisons who repulsed the attacks of the right-wing insurgents. It was far more complex than that. On 11 July rightists had seized Valencia radio station announcing that they were on the march. By 17 July Morocco was ablaze as the generals rampaged, killing leftists as they went. In this situation of extreme tension Casares Quiroga, the Prime Minister, announced that he was going to bed! Quiroga and the others of the key governmental figures discussed the question of arming the workers, but did not do so. On 19 July the Army rebelled in Barcelona (and elsewhere), Quiroga resigned. Here, the Assault Guards (formed by the republic), the Civil Guards and a few workers put down the rebellion. In Zaragoza the workers were cut down by the republican leader who had promised them arms. Although a few arms were gained by such means as storming ships in Barcelona harbour, workers only acquired weapons slowly as the republican government of Giral issued them via the unions. Only in these early days — when there were some armed workers working for revolution and a general strike was underway (particularly in Catalonia) — can we talk of a revolution. Once the republic and its bourgeois government had recovered its wits and the strike movement had been abandoned, the question of revolution had flown out of the window under cover of the clamour of anti-fascism. Although there was a great deal of spontaneous activity there was no real consciousness of the need to destroy the bourgeois state on the republican side. Above all, as our comrades in the Communist Left said at the time, there was no class party to encapsulate that consciousness in its programme. How then did the various forces that existed in Spain react?

The Anarchists

On 18 July the CNT declared a general strike in response to the situation. However, instead of continuing the strike and attempting to spread it throughout the land as the first step in the assault on capitalism it was called off. So five days later the workers returned to work in an orderly fashion. The justification was that wages had been marginally increased and hours had been reduced. In May the

CNT had held its Congress in Zaragoza, the main item on the agenda being 'libertarian communism', supposedly being an apt area for discussion in such 'revolutionary' times. As Juan Gómez Casas says in his history of the FAI:

A proclamation of libertarian communism would mean a breach with the small parties that had contributed to the struggle and would inhibit their freedom of expression. It would hurt small property owners, small farmers, and merchants, possibly pushing them into a united opposition against the CNT. An implacable dictatorship against part of the population would not only go against their own principals but would also mean committing suicide morally.

(Juan Gómez Casas, *Anarchist Organisation: the History of the FAI*, 1986)

The anarcho-syndicalists soon came to a largely unified opinion that 'libertarian communism' should only be discussed once Spain was reunified (the decision of the CNT plenum of July). But this begs the question of their statements that the social revolution was 'on the cards', also the question of the 'collectivisations'. The myth is that the workers seized arms and in part in a spontaneous manner marched off to wherever the front was, to fight the enemy, while at home began the process of the 'social revolution' through the collectivisation of the land and industry. The reality was that the CNT, the anarcho-syndicalist union (now reunited with its syndicalist wing, the Treintistas), took over the management of various enterprises under a continued capitalist regime. This was self-management, capitalist production with an anarchist flavour. The sum total of the strategy of the anarcho-syndicalists was to act in concert with the leftists, republicans and separatists around them leaving the ideals of 'libertarian communism' until another day. This was a continuation of the policy of the previous years, to talk about the ideals while acting as one among many of the left and centre. So the Central Anti-Fascist Militias Committee had this composition in July: CNT, 3; UGT, 3; FN, 2; PSUC, 1; POUM, 1; Esquerra, 3; Rabassaires Union, 1; Accion Catalan, 1. (See end for glossary.) A mixture of Stalinist, left socialist, social democratic, regionalists, conservative nationalists, and peasant proprietors. On 4 November the self-styled anti-governmental anarchists entered the central government — Juan Lopez, Minister of Commerce; Juan Peiró, Minister of Industry; Federica Montseny, Health Minister; Garcia Oliver, Justice Minister.

This was the leadership of a political tendency organising within the working class which had railed against the use of government because they were "anti-authoritarian". The FAI plenum of January 1936 had confirmed this stance. Now the anarchist daily *Solidaridad Obrera* was saying this was

the most transcendental day in the history of our country

and that

the government in this hour, as a regulating instrument of the organisms of the State, has ceased to be an oppressive force against the working class, just as the State no longer represents the organism which divides society into classes. And both will tend even less to oppress the people as a result of the intervention of the CNT [in the government]

whereas two months earlier

The existence of a Popular Front government, far from being an indispensable element in the anti-fascist struggle, is qualitatively a cheap imitation of this very struggle It is not a question, therefore of Marxism seizing power nor of the self-limitation of popular action for reasons of political opportunism. The 'Workers' State' is the end result of a revolutionary activity and the beginning of a new political slavery.

Here, we should point out that the positions and analyses of the internationalist communist left, through *Bilan* and *Prometeo*, were familiar to the leading militants of the anarchists. The Communist Left were arguing that rather than compromise with capitalism through entry into its governments what was needed was a move towards the destruction of that power. The anarchists were not unaware of the argument. They deliberately rejected it. These were after all the same anarchists who had consistently played the electoral games since 1931, making deals with the left parties along the way. If in theory they denied the need for political power, even a proletarian one, in practice they helped to organise the bourgeoisie in government, giving them 'left cover'. Their slogans on the inseparability of war and revolution gave an alibi for the Popular Front in its war of the bourgeois factions, and their entry into government (both the Cortés and the Generalitat, the central and Catalan governments) belied their declared principles.

By this alone they can be correctly labelled as being

within the camp of the counter-revolution rather than a revolutionary force.

Similarly on the economic front, as the communist left said,

historic experience has shown us that there can be no question of collectivisation, of workers' control of socialist revolution before the abolition of the political power of the bourgeoisie...
(Bilan, 'The War in Spain', January 1937)

The reality of the so-called collectivisations was thus,

In some factories all the workers drew a fixed weekly wage, but in others the profits or income were shared out among the workers, an arrangement which is more equitable than that the factory owner should put them in his pocket, but which nevertheless was not compatible with the spirit of the revolution which was to do away with bosses and shareholders and not increase their number by a kind of collective capitalism ...
(Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution*, p. 107)

This was nothing more than the Proudhonist vision of the worker and smallholder enjoying the full fruits of their labour under what was in reality still capitalism. Peirats, the anarchist historian, relates that anarchist newspapers carried many complaints of the surplus produced by these enterprises being consumed by the members of the collectives and not used for society as a whole. So it was that collectives on richer land remained rich, those on poor land remained poor. Factories abandoned by Francoist supporters were taken over by a joint UGT-CNT body but not one of those belonging to Popular Front capitalists. Can we really call this an 'economic revolution'? Certainly not! It was merely a situation in which capital could allow the working class to take over and possibly develop productive means until it was thoroughly defeated and then take it back. Whatever gains workers thought they were achieving could be rolled back when it suited the forces of capitalism precisely because the working class had not set out to destroy the political power of the capitalist class but instead allied with one faction of it. Thus Companys (the nationalist head of the Catalan government) could say of the CNT:

it has assumed the role, abandoned by the rebellious army, of controlling and protecting society and has become an instrument in the hands of the

democratic government.

This was hardly the stuff of a revolutionary organisation. The CNT was policing the working class for the bourgeois state, eventually to lead it on to physical defeat.

The POUM

In 1935 two smaller organisations came together to form the POUM. It receives a fond reception from many of the left today,⁽³⁾ something it ill deserves. It combined the Bloc Obrer i Camperol, the 'Workers' and Peasants Bloc' of Joaquin Maurin, and the



'La Pasionaria' in 1936: 'Passionate' in defence of Stalinism and capitalist democracy

Izquierda Comunista of Andres Nin, both had once been militants of the CNT and the PCE. Each had followed a slightly different trajectory. Maurin had broken with the Comintern on the question of Catalan nationalism, seeing the Madrid government as imperialist, the domination of a backward centre over a progressive periphery. He looked for a republic based upon the unity of workers and peasants. In practice he advocated a variety of class collaboration dressed in left rhetoric but effectively anti-soviet. Nin had once been Trotsky's secretary but they had fallen out seemingly over both personal matters and the question of entry into the PSOE in 1934. Both were to be murdered, Nin at the hands of the Stalinist SIM (secret police), Maurin at the hands of the Francoists.

The POUM was hated by the Stalinists not only because of the connection with Trotsky but because of its opposition to the Comintern and to Stalin and its espousal of a distinct (although confused) line against the PCE. This has made the POUM attractive to many modern leftists but in practice it offered up only a slightly rehashed version of popular frontism. Although it acquired some popularity with workers through its demand for a 36-hour week and wage rises in 1936, it did not back this up with anything more radical, being equally part of the militias

committees. Trotsky denounced the POUM for its support for the Popular Front, its alliances with bourgeois liberal forces and its accommodation with social democracy, valid criticisms, only to follow close on the heels of the POUM into the same radical support for the 'democratic' republic and the 'anti-Fascist' war.⁽⁴⁾ In and around the POUM was the tiny group of Trotsky-loyalists, the Spanish Bolshevik-Leninists (BLE), but these raised a ripple only in the Trotskyist press and nowhere else. Some of the worst nonsense came from the pen of Andres Nin, thus:

The workers defeated fascism and were fighting for socialism ... In Catalonia the dictatorship of the proletariat already exists ... We were part of a profound social revolution in Spain; our revolution was deeper than that which swept through Russia in 1917 ...
(quoted in *Bilan*, 'The War in Spain', January 1937)⁽⁵⁾

It is these sort of fundamental misconceptions that modern leftists echo today in the name of Marxism and which betray their own lack of understanding about the nature of revolution, proletarian dictatorship and socialism.

In 1937 the POUM was destroyed at the hands and the behest of the Stalinists. It was done under the pretext that the leadership had collaborated with Franco. The real reason was that they opposed the Stalinist order to abolish the militias and create a Popular Army.

The Stalinists and the 1937 May Days

In Barcelona, May 1937, the Stalinist PSUC and the nationalist Estat Catala took on the most active militants of the CNT/FAI, the POUM and others. Both the Trotskyists and anarchists call these events the last real act of defence of the revolution. For us, tragically, they were nothing more than a final realisation of the counter-revolutionary nature of the Spanish war. The event began as a faction fight between the CNT and the PSUC over control of the Barcelona telephone exchange. The local CNT called for a general strike but all of those involved agreed that it should not affect the war industries and general support for the Popular Front continued. The call was for the "defence of the revolution", not the start of the revolution. Nowhere did any of the participants opposing the PSUC and its allies mention taking on the power of the bourgeoisie as a whole, republican and Francoist.

The Stalinist position on the nature of events since July 1936 was clear. On the 19 July Dolores "La Pasionaria" Ibarurri launched her famous speech on "No pasaran!" (They shall not pass) with the following appeal:

Workers! Peasants! ! Antifascists! Spanish patriots! Stand up to the fascist military rebellion! Defend the Republic! Defend popular liberty and the democratic conquests of the people!

Not much idea of proletarian revolution here but plenty about patriotism and support for the bourgeois republic. A month later this was re-emphasised in the Stalinist press.

It is absolutely false that the present workers movement has for its object the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship after the war has terminated. It cannot be said we have a social motive for our participation in the war. We communists are the first to repudiate this supposition. We are motivated exclusively by a desire to defend the democratic republic.
(*Mundo Obrero*, Communist Party daily, August 6, 1936)

There was no chance of a struggle for the destruction of political power and establishing the working class on its historic course, not if the Stalinists could help it. José Diaz in 1937 could state that all of this came about through a misunderstanding of the situation, because the bourgeoisie had deserted their posts it was up to the Popular Front to continue capitalist production, socialisation of production was impermissible. The lack of commitment of the PCE to communism was clearly shown by its organisation of smallholders, in the GEPCI, the most committed opponents of collectivisation. As *Mundo Obrero* was to say,

In a capitalist society the small tradesmen and manufacturers constituted a class on the side of the democratic republic ... it is everybody's duty to respect the property of these small tradesmen and manufacturers ... We therefore strongly urge the members of our party and the militia in general, to demand, and if need be, to enforce respect for these middle class citizens ...

The events of May 1937 ended when the CNT/FAI ordered the laying down of arms. The eventual outcome was the banning of the POUM, the incorporation of the militias into the Popular Army largely under Stalinist control. Opponents of the

PCE/PSUC were murdered. Stalin could then safely control the situation, quietly spiriting the gold reserves of the Spanish state away, while currying favour with the soon-to-be-Allied powers of Britain and France. As a foreign policy to win friends for the USSR it failed (and Stalin later turned to Hitler to sign the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939) but it was resurrected in 1941 when anti-fascism became the slogan for mobilisation of the working class for imperialist war.

Revolution or Counter-revolution?

Such a simple question might demand a simple answer, but in this case it cannot be given. The Spanish working class had not been completely defeated by 1936. The next years were to provide a physical defeat to those workers who died heroically, ultimately in the service of their class enemy. It was to move on to that defeat that the Spanish generals, in the service of one faction of the bourgeoisie, took on the republic militarily. It was not a struggle of democracy against fascism. Franco's forces were rather more Carlist (royalist) and conservative than fascist. That conservative right then provided an opportunity for the German Nazi and the Italian fascist governments to test out, not only their weapons, but also the resolve of their imperialist rivals. The forces of democracy can be judged on their adherence to that 'ideal' by the secret funding of Franco by the British ruling class (via the NatWest Bank's predecessors) and the French 'radicals' fear of encouraging social experiments (the so-called collectivisations).

Was there a revolution in Spain in 1936? For just a few days in July 1936 the question was posed. We make no apologies for quoting once again from *Bilan* in 1937:

The facts speak clearly in this respect. It was precisely after July 19 that the proletariat, by joining its armed struggle with the general strike, succeeded in advancing further on the revolutionary road. It thus acquired the highest political consciousness that was compatible with its ideological immaturity and carried the social struggle to its highest point ... The general strike immediately took on a political and insurrectionary character while the workers were putting forward their own demands: the 36 hour week, wage increases, tentative moves towards appropriation of the factories, without, however — in the absence of a class party — grasping the necessity for the destruction of the bourgeois state. Even so, this understanding could have been

reached subsequently in the course of the process of formation of a party if the workers had kept the struggle on the terrain of their own class interests. (op.cit.)

This, they did not do. Once the strike was over the power of the republic not only went unchallenged but was reinforced by the backing of the forces of the left. The republican state always controlled the supply of arms, using the unions and others as proxies. At no time was the conquest of the bourgeois state, and its replacement by a proletarian order, seriously voiced. The anarchists took up ministries in the government, the POUM took up positions within the militias committees. Soviets, or workers' councils, were expressly opposed by all the forces of the republic:

*We did not support the formation of the soviets: there were no grounds in Spain for calling such. We stood for 'all power to the trades unions'. In no way were we politically oriented. The junta was simply a way out. (Balius, editor of the Friends of Durrutti paper *Friend of the People*.)*

Political power was channelled through the central government (first in Madrid, then in Valencia), through the Central Militia Committee, and to a lesser extent the Generalitat (the Catalan government). That power was controlled by parties committed to the defence of the capitalist order and its bourgeois democratic expression. The only programme on offer was the democratic programme of the bourgeoisie which was to ultimately lead to imperialist conflict. As we said ten years ago,

*... despite the heroism and class consciousness of the Spanish workers the events in Spain could not have reached as successful conclusion for the working class for two fundamental reasons. The first was the fact that the struggle for socialism has to be made on an international front which paralyses the capacity of imperialism to use the turmoil to its own advantage. In Spain the converse occurred — a potential proletarian revolution was from its earliest days converted into both a training ground for new techniques of warfare (which Picasso's *Guernica* graphically illustrates) and a pawn in the game of international diplomacy towards the second generalised imperialist war of the century. The defeat of the workers in Germany, Russia, Britain and Italy in the 1920s meant that the only possible support the Spanish workers might have counted on would have been from the French working class. Surely it is no accident therefore that the only other*

working class which was fully under the influence of the ideology of Popular Frontism was that in France where the workers were not physically defeated but were dominated by the same bourgeois ideology in the guise of socialism as in Spain.

(**Workers Voice 30**, August 1986)

It is a tragedy of our class history that so many brave Spanish workers were sacrificed under the banners of democracy. It is our task to try to make sure such a tragedy is not repeated and this is why we are fundamentally opposed to all the anti-fascist supporters of the democratic state today.

Clastré

Notes

1. After 1934 he was called, and he thought of himself as a sort of Spanish 'Lenin'. He was a lifelong reformist who had also accepted a ministry under the dictatorship. For an analysis of the 1934 Asturias rising see In Commemoration of the Asturias Soviet in *Workers Voice 19*.

2. This was the judgement of Manuilsky, one of the Comintern higher-ups, so said because of the slavish pro-Moscow attitude of the PCE.

3. As in Ken Loach's film *Land and Freedom*. For our review of this film see *Revolutionary Perspectives 1* (third series).

4. Originally Trotsky only supported the notion of the united front, but then became rather more confused and confusing on the question of support for democracy and the pursuit of anti-fascism.

5. Much of this nonsense on the so-called superiority of the Spanish Revolution over the Russian is also found in the book of the then Trotskyist (Bolshevik-Leninist), Grandizo Munis, *Jalones derrota, promesa de victoria, (Remnants of Defeat, Promise of Victory)* Mexico 1948. It is a position constantly asserted, but never proved, by eco-anarchists like Murray Bookchin who also aver that proletarian revolution is a thing of the past.

Glossary

CNT National Confederation of Workers, anarcho-syndicalist union confederation.

FAI Iberian Anarchist Federation, anarchist organisation organising within the CNT attempting to keep it within the ideological bounds of anarchism.

POUM Workers' Party of Marxist Unification, left socialist party variously described as Trotskyist, closer to such social democratic parties as the British ILP and the German SAB. Formed in September 1935, its main strongholds were Lerida and Barcelona.

PSUC Catalan Party of Socialist Unification, formed as the Catalan Stalinists absorbed local socialists into a larger and wider party established in July 1936. Esquerra Catalan bourgeois liberal party, led by Companys.

Rabassaire Union union of peasant smallholders in Catalonia.

PCE Spanish Communist Party led by Dolores Ibarruri and Jose Diaz.

PSOE the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party the socialist party of Largo Caballero and Indalecio Prieto. Its youth section, led by Santiago Carrillo, went over en masse to the PCE at the start of the Civil War.

UGT the socialist-led union confederation.

The Spanish Civil War and the Myth of Anarchism

From Workers Voice 30 Aug 15-Sept 30 1986

It is exactly fifty years since the event which bourgeois histories universally call 'the Spanish Civil War' began. The rising of a group of disaffected Army officers on 18 July 1936 soon won it the overwhelming support of the most reactionary sections of the Spanish ruling classes and the instant aid of Fascist dictators like Mussolini and Hitler. The story of how the British and French ruling classes, in their desire to appease Hitler, cooked up the theory of "non-intervention" to avoid supporting the legally elected Popular Front government of Spain is well known. Equally well known is the fact that this played an important part in the victory of the nationalists led by General Franco. Less well known are the facts about the class struggle in Spain which the war that broke out in July 1936 put an end to. Although the rising of the Generals provoked another revolt — of a spontaneous nature — by the working class, the Spanish Republic, aided and abetted by the Anarchists, Socialists and Stalinists, was able to survive it. This was because these forces which pretended to represent the working class put the cause of bourgeois democracy before that of proletarian revolution. Today's celebrations of the anniversary of the Spanish War are therefore bourgeois celebrations which salute the "anti-fascist struggle" but which pretend that this was all part of the "revolution". In the foreword to one of the publications celebrating those events Michael Foot, ex-Labour leader and humbug, wrote that "the more the whole story is unravelled and recalled the better for the future of democracy everywhere". What he really meant was that the more bourgeois versions of the story are trotted out the safer will the democratic form of capitalist government be. This brief article can only indicate the outlines of the real proletarian history of those events by exploding the myth that the fight for the Republic was a working class fight.

Anti-Fascism: The Slogan of Imperialism

The events in Spain are often treated as if the Iberian Peninsula has no connection with the rest of Europe and that the struggles there were somehow

unique to Spain. In one sense this was true since the Spanish ruling class had been so divided in 1914 that it had never entered the First World War. Thus, despite the intensity of class struggle in Spain in the early part of the century there was nothing to compare with the struggles in those countries which had been devastated by the war. Thus the settling of accounts between bourgeoisie and proletariat in those countries in the early 1920s (e.g. the defeat of the workers in Italy in 1920 or in Germany in the March Action of 1921) had no sequel in Spain.

The defeat of the revolutionary wave which followed the First World War was, however, to have its consequences for the Spanish workers in the 1930s since workers in Spain not only struggled in isolation from most of the rest of the European working class but also faced the full onslaught of an imperialist network of diplomacy in its final preparations for another generalised war. How did this situation arise?

The First World War, as Bukharin saw, was only the first round in a series of imperialist conflicts which continue to this day. In Eastern Europe the defeated and discontented bourgeoisies, once they had repelled the revolutionary impulses of the working class and had massacred the most class conscious of them, turned to nationalist, authoritarian right wing regimes which aimed at internal order and at imperialist expansion. Fascism became the bourgeois fashion of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe. With the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany in 1933 came a new round of frenetic diplomatic activities. The effete aristocrats who ran the British and French Foreign Offices tried to turn Hitler's attentions to the East to tame 'the bestial appetites of Bolshevism' (Churchill). By now however Stalin's USSR had about as much relationship to the revolutionary Bolshevism of 1917 as a maggot to a corpse. It fed only on its proletarian reputation in order to use it to fool the workers in the rest of Europe into thinking that Russia remained a workers' state. The Comintern, once conceived by Lenin as a genuine workers

international which would guide the approaching world revolution, was by now nothing but a second office of the Foreign Ministry of Russian imperialism. It was in the Comintern that Stalin was to launch his major diplomatic offensive to win over the Western democracies to an anti-Nazi alliance. At the 7th Comintern Congress in 1935 the policy of the Popular Front was first announced. Now Communist parties throughout Europe were instructed to make electoral and other forms of alliance, not only with other so-called workers' parties (like the Social Democrats who had saved imperialism both during and after the First World War) but also with liberals and conservatives of the old sort who were opposed to the new totalitarian government of fascism. Anti-fascism was thus the slogan which would unite Russia to Western imperialism. Although it failed initially to achieve Stalin's objective of an anti-German alliance it was the ideological basis of the alliance with the USA and Britain after 1941. In Spain though anti-fascism was to perform a great service for the Spanish bourgeoisie.

The Spanish Republic and the Popular Front

The Spanish bourgeoisie had been unable to establish a stable form of domination over society even when the conditions for the accumulation of capital were good. In the situation after the 1929 Wall St. Crash, when the class struggle intensified, it found it almost impossible to unite against the working class. This was the fundamental cause of the bourgeois 'Civil War'. The tragedy for the Spanish workers was that their own civil war against the whole bourgeoisie was abandoned as it became drawn into the struggle on the side of "democracy" against fascism.

The Spanish Republic was set up in 1931 following the collapse of the military dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera who fled to Paris when Spain's economic problems became manifestly insoluble. The Republic was the product of Republican and Socialist intellectuals who represented the industrial bourgeoisie (the leading Socialist, Prieto, was in fact a millionaire from industrial holdings in the Basque country) and immediately aroused the anger of the traditional agrarian capitalist class who tried to retain their traditional privileges whilst using the new power of domination that capitalism gave them

over the labour force. Whilst the latter organised themselves effectively enough to win power from 1933 to 1935 (the so-called "Black Two Years") the Republicans, Socialists and tiny Communist Party (PCE) eagerly grasped at the Popular Front formula of the Comintern in order to win the elections of February 1936. The accession to power of the Left wing of the Spanish ruling class did not lead to a new period of quietness in the class struggle. Rather the opposite happened since the working class intensified its struggle and demanded that the bourgeois politicians keep some of the promises which they had been so liberal with in the election campaign. Strikes, assassinations and lockouts were daily occurrences in the first half of 1936. It was the failure of the Left to tame the working class that led to the attempted coup by Franco. But Franco's coup unleashed a spontaneous revolt of the workers throughout Spain — above all in Madrid and Barcelona.

The Workers Rising

When news of Franco's coup reached Madrid the the Republican leaders of the Government were paralysed. Although they had arms at their disposal they knew the dangers that Spanish capitalism would run if these were handed over to the one force capable of organising against the Generals.



The bodies of workers and their enemies outside the Montaña Barracks in Madrid, July 1936

The working class would not only be able to fight the fascists but would be in a position to carry out the social revolution. Whilst the Government of Martínez Barrios refused to arm the workers the working class were already attacking the barracks of the Republican Assault Guards and the Civil Guard in Madrid and Barcelona and seized arms

for themselves. In this situation the Popular Front Government shuffled the pack once more and replaced Martinez Barrios with the Giral Government which contained PSOE leaders. This government now sanctioned what was already going on except that the weapons were released into the hands of the trades unions. By 20 April the bourgeoisie was already finding the organisational means to recuperate the spontaneous revolt of two days earlier. It was the beginning of a process which converted the class anger of the workers into the mere adjunct of an inter-imperialist war. Instrumental in this process, and indeed essential to it, was the role of the two supposedly proletarian organisations, the anarchist CNT and the PSOE and its union organisation, the UGT.

The Debacle of Spanish Anarchism

Anarchism is currently undergoing something of a revival in Western Europe though it seems unlikely that the majority of those who now nominally espouse the doctrine know much about either its history or its theory. In Spain the bankruptcy of anarchist theory was to have tragic consequences for the proletariat. In 1936 the Anarchists of the CNT-FAI represented the vast majority of the class conscious proletarians of Barcelona and they openly declared the struggle against Franco to be the beginning of a social revolution. Unfortunately these fine words were not matched by CNT deed which revealed the inadequacy of anarchism as a revolutionary theory of the proletariat.

The first Anarchist capitulation came in Catalonia where the bourgeois President of the Catalan Government told the CNT leaders that "Today you are the masters of the city", a thought so terrifying for them that they promptly accepted his plea that "you can count on me and my loyalty as a man who is convinced that the whole past of shame is dead and desires passionately that Catalonia should henceforth stand among the most progressive countries in the world." (From the book by the CNT leader Garcia Oliver, *De Julio a Julio*.) So instead of destroying bourgeois power the Anarchists left it intact and soon fell in with the Popular Front mentality which they had abstained from earlier. Instead of proclaiming the end of the Popular Front and its replacement with proletarian power they actually set up an Anti-Fascist Militias Committee which co-ordinated the actions of the Anarchists with those of the Socialists and the communists and thus consolidated the bourgeois power of the Popular Front government. In November

1936 they went one better and joined the Madrid Government, now headed by Largo Caballero of the PSOE. When Juan Peiro, Federica Montseny and Garcia Oliver joined the Popular Front the CNT daily, *Solidaridad Obrera*, called it "the most transcendental day in the history of our country". The same paper went on to maintain that this was a step forward for the proletarian revolution:

The government in this hour, as a regulating instrument of the organisms of the State, no longer represents the organism which divides society into classes. And both will tend even less to oppress the people as a result of the intervention of the CNT (in the government). [From 'Lessons of the Spanish Revolution' by the anarchist Vernon Richards.]

After denying for decades that the Marxists were wrong to maintain the need for a proletarian power as oppressive the Anarchists now leapt into bed with the bourgeoisie claiming that this prostitution would convert the bourgeois state to the workers' friend. Furthermore, the CNT adopted the same slogans as the other Popular Front parties that the war and the revolution were inseparable. This was precisely what the Stalinists were saying since concern for the anti-fascist fight was the best means to undermine the independent struggles of the Spanish proletariat.

However, whilst many anarchists would concede these failures they take refuge in the fact that "the real revolution" was taking place in the countryside, in the agrarian collectives. This not only reveals the cardinal weakness of anarchism in that it fails to see that without control of the political process no economic revolution can be meaningfully enacted but also shows that these anarchists are blind to the facts. The agrarian collectives, whatever the subjective will of their members, did not do away with the essentially exploitative relations of a class society. Each collective worked for itself in competition with other collectives and thus we had a kind of Proudhonist world which divided the collectives into rich and poor, depending on the nature of the land around them. Even anarchists like Richards were forced to admit that:

In some factories all the workers drew a fixed weekly wage, but in others the profits or income were shared out amongst the workers, an arrangement which ... was not compatible with the spirit of the revolution.

By fostering illusions about a political and economic

revolution the anarchists became part of the process of the counter-revolution itself and thus played their part in preparing the way for the final act of the Stalinist counter-revolution — the May Days of 1937 in Barcelona.

The Socialists and the Stalinists

The CNT were, however, only the sorcerer's apprentices at counter-revolution compared with the vastly more politically experienced Socialist Party (PSOE) who in their turn were destroyed by the Stalinists of the PCE.

The PSOE was a typical reformist party of the Second International but unlike its counterparts elsewhere it was able to maintain the myth that it was still a workers' party because the Spanish bourgeoisie had not entered the imperialist war in 1914. This meant that the PSOE was not involved in mobilising workers for the war as in other European countries. However, the PSOE had its own forms of class collaboration since its leader had become Minister of Labour under the Primo de Rivera dictatorship whilst the Republic was actually set up by an alliance of Socialists and liberal politicians. What kept the PSOE's reputation as a workers' party above all was its supposed leading role in the Asturias rising of 1934. In fact the PSOE leaders actually made a major contribution to the defeat of the workers here by warning the bourgeoisie of what was happening as well as calling off the insurrection in the rest of Spain. However, since the courts gave Largo Caballero a 30 year prison sentence (which no-one expected him to serve) he emerged as a martyr in the bourgeois press and now took to calling himself "the Spanish Lenin". (In order to live up to this gross comparison this lifelong reformist took to reading Lenin's works whilst he spent a few months in prison.) As we shall see, Largo Caballero's false reputation as a genuine socialist was to be very useful to the counter-revolution in the early months of the Spanish War.

This was particularly true of the first week of the workers' insurrection after the Franco coup. The issue was posed clearly at the time by the International Communist Left in their journal *Bilan*:

The facts speak clearly in this respect. It was precisely after 19 July that the proletariat by joining its armed struggle with the general strike succeeded in advancing the furthest on the revolutionary road, acquiring the highest political consciousness compatible with its ideological immaturity, carrying

the SOCIAL struggle to its highest point ... The general strike immediately took on a political and insurrectionary character while the workers were putting forward their demands: the 36 hour week, wage increases, the tentative moves towards the expropriation of the factories, without however, in the absence of the class party, grasping the necessity for the destruction of the bourgeois state. But this understanding could have been reached subsequently, in the course of the process of formation of a party, if the workers had kept the struggle on the terrain of their own class interests, their material conditions, the only basis which would allow them to oppose the WHOLE capitalist class.

But the socialist UGT and the anarchist CNT both brought the general strike to an end in the interests of the war against Franco. They returned factories to bourgeois supporters of the Popular Front so that only Nationalist-owned factories were expropriated and, as we have already seen, converted the spontaneous militia committees into the Anti-Fascist Militia Committee which was a mere appendage of the Popular Front.

In November 1936 the collaboration of the CNT and the PSOE-UGT reached its apogee in the formation of the Largo Caballero Government which was created specifically to increase the loyalty of the workers to the Popular Front. In short, it completed the process of turning the class war into an imperialist war. This was further underlined by the entry of the Stalinists into the Government for the first time. Although there were only two PCE ministers they retained an influence far beyond their numbers since the Popular Front was entirely dependent on the USSR for its arms and other supplies. This influence was used to further the policies of Stalin in gaining an alliance with the Western powers and this meant that the social revolution in Spain had to be crushed.

The Rise of the Spanish Communist Party

The leaders of the Spanish Communist Party were a singularly colourless bunch and the party had always been a pliant tool of Moscow. At the beginning of the Spanish War its numbers had been minuscule but the needs of the Spanish bourgeoisie soon changed that. The outbreak of the war caught Stalin by surprise and it was thus some months before he was able to send arms to aid the Republic. With the arms came his agents like Gero, Togliatti and Codovilla. They were soon to be the real rulers on the Republican side. Their first orders to the PCE

were that it defend the rights of property owners everywhere in the Republican zone since the weak and divided liberal Republican parties had failed to do this. Whilst the initial idea behind the policy was to prove to the ruling classes in Britain and France that the Republic was not very 'Red' at all and thus worthy of the support of the democracies, it actually led to a rise in PCE membership.

Whilst this policy won over individual Tories like the Duchess of Atholl, the French and British were far more interested in a German than a Russian alliance so for the time being the policy failed. However, within Spain it led to a dramatic rise in the numbers of the PCE which became a mass party on the basis of the support it enjoyed amongst the petty bourgeois producers of areas like Murcia and Valencia. And with the PCE in the Government to take advantage of the splits amongst the socialists it was the PCE policies which dominated (such as the replacement of the militias by a regular bourgeois army and the shipment of the Spanish gold reserves to Russia to ostensibly buy arms). By May 1937 the PCE was ready to crush the last vestiges of proletarian independence which continued to manifest itself in workers control of public utilities and factories in Catalonia. The famous "May Days" of 1937 began when the Stalinists attempted to seize the Barcelona telephone exchange and workers throughout the city took to arms and threw up barricades all over the city. The event was the final capitulation of the CNT before a reality they could not understand. After a few days fighting they negotiated a ceasefire, the outcome of which was to deliver the city into the hands of the Stalinists. Whilst a few individual militants were prepared to ignore the ceasefire the Barcelona working class followed the CNT leaders for the last time and thus they were delivered up to the PCE which was able to take over the city with 5,000 Assault Guards and the blessing of the new Socialist Government of Negrin. Having ended the social revolt in the interests of the bourgeoisie, Largo Caballero and the Anarchist Ministers were now expendable. In the next two years Barcelona and Madrid were to be subject to two terrors — first that of the SIM (the Spanish equivalent of the NKVD) and then that of Franco.

Lessons of the Spanish War

We have tried to demonstrate here that, despite the heroism and the class consciousness of the Spanish workers the events in Spain could not have reached a successful conclusion for the working class for two fundamental reasons. The first was

the fact that the struggle for socialism has to be made on an international front which paralyses the capacity of imperialism to use the turmoil to its own advantages. In Spain the converse occurred — a potential proletarian revolution was from its earliest days converted into both a training ground for new techniques of warfare (which Picasso's *Guernica* so graphically illustrates) and a pawn in the game of international diplomacy leading towards the second generalised imperialist war of the century. The defeat of the workers in Germany, Russia, Britain and Italy in the 1920s meant that the only possible support the Spanish workers might have counted on would have been from the French working class. Surely it is no accident therefore that the only other working class which was fully under the influence of the ideology of Popular Frontism was that in France where the workers were not physically defeated but were dominated by the same bourgeois ideology in the guise of socialism as in Spain.

The domination of bourgeois ideology over the proletariat in Spain also accounts for the failure of the Spanish workers to break either from PSOE reformism or the petty bourgeois localism of the CNT to form the class party of the proletariat. Even those elements which attempted to break with the domination of the counter-revolutionary Third International like the POUM, the Friends of Durrutti or the Trotskyists, all fell into the same trap — the trap of anti-fascism. Instead of supporting the autonomous struggles of the proletariat in July 1936 they tried to limit these struggles within the limits of the bourgeois aims of the Popular Front. Instead of a war against ALL the bourgeoisie they wanted a war against the Nationalists first and hoped to save the real class war for the future. Thus they all supported the Popular Front governments, all wanted to limit the general strike of 1936 to factories which made no contribution to the war effort and they all called for "defence of the revolution" rather than make the real revolution against the bourgeois state in its democratic form. (See the evidence of the ex-Trotskyist participant Grandizo Munis in his book *Jalones de Derrota*.) One thing that the Spanish War proves above all others is that the proletariat in this century can no longer follow the politics of the lesser evil, i.e. support for the left of the bourgeoisie against the right. The only path to the emancipation of the working class lies in the struggle on its own terrain and for its own interests.

And to fight for its own interests it is essential that the working class creates the basic form of political organisation which leads the ideological

fight against all bourgeois ideologies and acts as a practical guide in the vital moments when proletarian action on a wide scale is possible. The International Communist Left were correct in the course of the Spanish War to point to the absence of such an organisation — a fact which was indicative of the depth of the counter-revolution over the working class everywhere following the defeat of the post-war revolutionary wave in the 1920s. It also shows that the political consciousness of the working class cannot be a mere passive product of the economic conditions of the time. In the 1930s the Spanish proletariat faced enormous economic hardships (e.g. unemployment amongst Barcelona building workers in 1936 was 70%) and this produced a militant and heroic capacity for united action on a class basis but it was not sufficient for the Spanish working class to see through the pretensions of the PSOE, CNT and PCE which they considered to be their real representatives. Proletarian political consciousness therefore has to be fought for, whatever the economic conditions that are confronting the working class. This remains the major task of communists today. It is the prime activity of the International Bureau of the Revolutionary Party to which the CWO is affiliated. The future party of the proletariat must be international and it must be the expression of the independent struggles of the working class capable of understanding the vital lessons of the struggles of the past and applying those lessons to today's working class practice.

Spain Fifty Years After

Today in Spain as in 1936 we find the “socialists” of the PSOE in power, with Felipe Gonzalez doing precisely the same job (albeit with different rhetoric) for the bourgeoisie as Largo Caballero did fifty years ago. However, signs remain that the workers are no longer taken in by talk of not striking against a “socialist” government. In the car factories of Valencia and especially in the shipyards of Giron the Spanish working class have spearheaded the resistance to the austerity measures which the crisis of profitability of Spanish capital has forced the bourgeoisie in Spain to resort to. The only force capable of carrying this out (precisely because of its supposed record in the Spanish War) is the PSOE. By keeping the left in power (as in the recent elections) the Spanish bourgeoisie hopes to carry its austerity plans still further and has recognised that the PSOE has been relatively successful. For their part, the workers of Giron have shown that they are as capable of laying down their lives to defend

their conditions of existence as their proletarian ancestors. Already they have responded to police tear gas by arming themselves. However, the chief weapon of the working class is its capacity for self-organisation. Once workers everywhere are struggling simultaneously and in solidarity with each other organised under the leadership of their own party they will be irresistible.

Then the nostalgia of the Spanish War will be recognised for the nightmare it was and its memory can be expunged altogether by the deeds of the proletariat of the present.

The Barcelona May Days of 1937

From Revolutionary Perspectives 42

Last year was the 70th anniversary of the war in Spain. The Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 has evoked more political comment and historical reflection than almost any other event in modern times. With each passing decade, the myths of Spain do not diminish as the supporters of the various protagonists in that war all vie to have their version of events dominate political discourse.

This year sees the anniversary of the events of May 1937 which many wrongly see as the end of the revolution in Spain. As the article about those events which we have translated and are reprinting here from *Bilan* 41, monthly theoretical bulletin of the Italian fraction of the Communist Left, shows, there was at least one current within the working class which defended the independent interest of the working class. Whilst almost everyone else was rushing to support (critically or not) the Spanish Republic, *Bilan* from the very beginning¹ pointed out that the support for a bourgeois state meant the automatic abandonment of the revolutionary programme. Their analysis was to be proved right as the war went on and the illusions of those who thought that they were making a revolution were crushed. *Bilan* also clearly saw the international context in which the working class was struggling.

“The fact that world war has not yet broken out does not mean that the Spanish and international proletariat has not already been mobilised for the purpose of butchering itself under the imperialist slogans of fascism and anti-fascism.” (Bilan 34 (August-September 1936)

In historical terms the international working class was still staggering under the weight of the material and ideological defeat of the revolutionary wave that followed the First World War. The last gasps of this revolutionary wave had died in 1927 along with thousands of Chinese workers betrayed into a united front alliance with the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang which had then butchered them. The isolation of the one successful bastion where workers had destroyed the power of the capitalist

state had led to the demise of the soviets, the real organs of workers' power, and the rise of a partyocracy which, under the dictatorship of Stalin, set about destroying whatever was left of the proletarian achievement of October 1917. In the course of this counter-revolution all the truly revolutionary elements in the Communist International were expelled. In Italy the Left had not only founded the Communist Party of Italy but continued to dominate the thinking of its members even after Bordiga and his allies had been removed from the leadership in 1923 and Gramsci's leadership imposed upon the Party by the Comintern Executive Committee. Gramsci only succeeded in getting rid of the left by threatening to cut off salaries to officials who voted against his Lyons Theses. Whilst Bordiga eventually retired from political life, and others like Damen spent most of the inter-war years in Fascist gaols, some members of the Left formed the fraction in exile at Pantin, near Paris, in 1928. They recognised that the working class had been terribly defeated, although they also saw that it was premature to found a new party as the political clarity about that defeat had not yet emerged.² Just how profound that defeat was took some time to absorb and it would only be in the 1940s that members of the Italian Fraction would fully understand the class nature of the USSR. However, in 1936 and 1937 they were already aware that “the Soviet State” was playing the role of hangman of the proletariat and would “deliver them over to the general staff of both sides”.

To put the text in its real context we have written a brief historical introduction to show that the *Bilan* analysis was not something abstracted from all reality but based solidly on what was actually going on in Spain at the time. This is necessary, if only to combat those who are brought up on sentimental notions that proletarian victory was just around the corner in Spain 1936, or those who are still enmeshed in the notion that anti-fascism is something other than a fight for bourgeois democracy.

IBRP April 2007

The General's Revolt and the Workers' Resistance

*I had come to Spain with some notion of writing newspaper articles, but I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do. The Anarchists were still in virtual control in Catalonia and the revolution was still in full swing... It was the first time that I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle ... In outward appearances it was a town in which the wealthy classes had ceased to exist.
[Homage to Catalonia]*

This famous description of Barcelona in December 1936 from the opening passage of George Orwell's book contains many of the illusions of the time, and not just in the English-speaking world, about the situation in Spain after July 19th 1936. On the previous day, General Franco had led his pronunciamiento against the Popular Front Government elected only the previous February. In the normal course of events in Spain, such military coups normally succeeded instantly and a new dictatorship would emerge. Had the Popular Front Government had its way, Franco's *golpe de estado* would have been no different. On the very day of the coup, the Prime Minister Casares Quiroga, with the support of the President Manuel Azaña, announced that anyone giving arms to the workers would be shot. Meanwhile he was trying to negotiate with the Francoists. When he failed, Azaña then called on the Speaker of the Cortès, Martínez Barrio, "the arch priest of compromise"³ to try to do a deal with Franco whilst ignoring the 100 000 workers who marched to Madrid's Puerta del Sol demanding arms. It was only the refusal of the then plot leader, General Mola, to agree to a national coalition government that prevented the two wings of the bourgeoisie from reaching an agreement against the working class. At this point Giral, a close personal friend of the President, became the third Prime Minister in less than twenty four hours. He concluded that there was no alternative but to arm the workers since some workers had managed to seize arms (either from Government depots or from the conscripts of the regular army who joined them) and were already fighting back. The leaders of the Spanish Socialist Party, Largo Caballero and Indalecio Prieto were as horrified at this as the bourgeois liberals. Only when Giral said it would be done in a controlled way through the trade union organisations, the Socialist UGT and the Anarchist CNT, did they accept it. The reason why we have

presented this story in such detail should now be clear: the bourgeoisie of all parties, including those which represented the working class in the Spanish parliament (The Cortes) were united in opposing any idea of workers' initiative on the streets as any real popular revolt would rob them of their power.

In a sense their prevarications meant that they were already too late and had lost control of the situation. In the territories which rallied to the Republic, and above all in Barcelona, the workers not only launched a general strike but in many cases defeated the Army plot with pathetically few weapons. In many towns and cities including Madrid, Bilbao, Barcelona, San Sebastian, Gijon, Valencia, Cartagena, and even Malaga, the workers were victorious. And as the bourgeoisie feared the popular resistance awakened the consciousness of the workers. This comes as no surprise to Marxists who understand that it is the very act of revolution which transforms human consciousness. In Spain it was no different. Workers began to set up committees to take over the functions of a state which had collapsed as a result of the Generals' coup. Post and telegraph offices, radio stations, telephone exchanges, border posts, transport and supply depots were all controlled by committees. However as these committees were generally made up of representatives of the trades unions, the UGT and CNT under the so-called working class parties their future development depended on the line that the parties took on the question of revolution. And this was the problem. Ominously the spontaneously created workers' militias were, on July 23rd put under an Anti-Fascist Militia Committee. This became the main directing organ of the workers in Barcelona. Or, in other words, the struggle was being immediately transformed from one of social revolution against all bourgeois factions into support for the left bourgeoisie.

The Popular Front Government had been elected in February 1936. It was made up of the Stalinist Spanish Communist Party (PCE), the Socialists (PSOE), and the various left bourgeois and regional parties. It even had the open support of the Anarchist CNT (although as a syndicalist organisation it did not put up candidates itself) a factor which was critical to its electoral success. From the start, the task of the Popular Front was to calm the class struggle but workers expected it to deliver social justice in the face of Spain's chronic economic backwardness. The fact that it itself had to carry out massacres of workers and farm labourers at places like Casas Viejas to

try to impose its authority showed what little success this bourgeois project had. As the strikes, assassinations, and land seizures by poor landless labourers continued the Spanish Right prepared their coup. The difference between the two sides, between Franco and Azaña, was not one of class, as they shared a fear of the “communism” of the working classes, but on which policy was best to employ to defeat the class movement. In the first few days after the failed coup, the working class had gone beyond the Popular Front whose leaders had sought a compromise regime of all the capitalist classes against the working class. At this critical juncture the question that should have been posed was the question of state power. In the chaos of the days after the coup, state power collapsed and workers’ actions took advantage of the vacuum. But filling a void is not the same thing as consciously destroying the bourgeois state. In this situation, the working class needed its own autonomous party with programme based on the need to maintain the revolution, further fraternise with the conscripts who were still in the Francoist armies and maintain the class war. But no such party with a deep enough implantation in the Spanish working class existed. Instead, the workers who were organised were in the PSOE trade union, the UGT, or the anarcho-syndicalist CNT. Both these organisations were to play a central role in the re-establishment of the bourgeois state under the banner of the Popular Front. On a national level it was clear by late autumn that a Popular Front headed by bourgeois liberals did not have a great deal of credibility amongst workers who believed that they were fighting for a new society, so Largo Caballero, the PSOE leader became Prime Minister with the quiet encouragement of the PCE. Largo Caballero was a veteran reformist who had even accepted the post of Minister of Labour under the monarchy. However, under the Republic he adopted adventurist policies, styling himself the “Spanish Lenin”. His greatest betrayal was the 1934 general strike which he called but was a complete flop (and Largo Caballero allowed himself to be arrested so that he could disown it). Unfortunately, the miners of Asturias had taken his call for a strike seriously, and broke out in open revolt. This revolt was left isolated and crushed, with thousands of dead and wounded by Moroccan legionaries led by Franco. As Prime Minister, Largo Caballero was increasingly the tool of the PCE which was growing in support, particularly amongst the middle class and small proprietors on the Republican side, precisely because it was following Stalin’s orders that the revolution must be suppressed in order for Stalin to continue his

policy of seeking an alliance with France and Britain against Hitler. As Stalin was also the Republic’s major weapon supplier, PCE power inside the Governmental apparatus increased dramatically. By May 1937, they were ready to dispense with Largo Caballero for a more pliant front man. This already brings us to the question of the international context in which the Spanish War was taking place, but, before we tackle that, let us look at what the anarchists did to aid the restoration of the Spanish state through their support for the Popular Front.

The anarchists of the CNT-FAI

In theory, the breakdown of the state in July 1936 was an anarchist dream come true. Now the question of finishing off the bourgeoisie was on the agenda, especially in Barcelona. But what happened? When the anarchist leaders, Garcia Oliver and Juan Peiro went, on July 20th, to see the President of the Generalitat, Luis Companys, the latter played a rhetorically localist card. Apologising for past repression of the anarchists he told them that:

If you do not need me or do not wish me to remain as President of Catalonia, tell me now, and I shall become one more soldier in the fight against Fascism. If, on the other hand, you believe that, in this position which, only as a dead man, would I have abandoned had the Fascists triumphed, if you believe that I, my party [the Esquerra, a Catalan left bourgeois party — IBRP], my name, my prestige, can be of use, then you can count on me and my loyalty as a man who is convinced that a whole past of shame is dead and who desires passionately that Catalonia should henceforth stand amongst the most progressive countries in the world.

[From Garcia Oliver’s own memoir *De Julio a Julio*, quoted in H. Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* p210-1]

The result was that the bourgeois regime of the Generalitat in Catalonia was saved. The CNT called off the general strike on July 23rd and on the 26th the CNT of Catalonia formally announced that its members should “look no further” than the defeat of fascism. By September, there were three anarchist ministers in the Catalan Government, which the CNT dubbed “the Regional Defence Council”, in order to disguise the fact that it had actually entered a bourgeois government. In short the independent working class action which had brought about a potential revolutionary situation was peremptorily abandoned for a Union Sacrée[®] with the Republican bourgeoisie in the anti-fascist

struggle and the defence of bourgeois democracy.

And this was only the beginning of the anarchist betrayal of their principles and the working class. The bourgeoisie, which included the PCE, fully intended to restore state power as soon as possible (the CNT might have thought it could be generous in calling off the class war until Franco was beaten but the capitalist class will never do such a thing even for minute). The CNT went further in destroying the revolutionary pretensions of the working class. In order to further fool the workers and make them believe that it was “their” democracy they were fighting and dying for, the bourgeoisie decided to bring Largo Caballero to power in November 1936. Grossly flattered by the PCE as the “Spanish Lenin”, the leader of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) formed a “Government of Victory” which contained Communists, Socialist and Left Republicans. As the name implied there was to be no more talk of “total revolution”, everything was to be submitted to the military need to defeat the Nationalists. However, this was to be a process taking many months leading up to May 1937. The next step in the assistance the CNT gave to the restoration of the power of the bourgeois state came in November 1937. In that month, the CNT-FAI leaders, Juan Peiro, Federica Montseny and Garcia Oliver all entered the Largo Caballero ministry. The CNT’s daily paper, *Solidaridad Obrero* described this as

... the most transcendental day in the political history of our country. [emphasis ours — IBRP]

To justify this required a bit of double-speak worthy of Stalinism.

The government in this hour, as the regulating instrument of the organisms of the State, has ceased to be an oppressive force against the working class, just as the State no longer represents the organism which divides society into classes. And both will tend even less to oppress the people as a result of the intervention of the CNT [in the government].

[Both quotes from Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* p69]

What the CNT were doing was playing the bourgeois game in defiance of its stated positions. They were not alone in falling for the anti-fascist rationale but their betrayal seems the greater given the theoretical positions of anarchism for the preceding three generations. What these actions demonstrate is the political weakness of anarchist theory. The slide into nationalism (note the emphasis we

added to the words “our country” above) and the insistence that fighting fascism was the same as revolution was simply an ideological camouflage which hid the betrayal of the CNT. They had now helped to set the stage for the increasingly powerful PCE to engineer their next manoeuvre against the working class.

Against this political critique of the CNT’s leadership, anarchists take refuge in the notion that there was still a social revolution at grassroots level and that this was the most important thing. Revolution cannot be anything else than the product of the conscious actions of the great mass of human beings. If it is not, it will be no revolution. And there is no doubt that many of the social experiments carried out in the towns and villages on the Republican side were prefigurations of a better society. However, even anarchist writers like Jose Peirats and Vernon Richards recognised that the collectives were far from ideal representatives of “libertarian communism”. Many simply took over the running of factories abandoned by Franco supporters (significantly, even in Barcelona any capitalist who stayed was allowed to continue as before). Richards admits that many of the self-managed agricultural collectives did not function other than as “a kind of collective capitalism”⁵. This echoes Marx criticism of Proudhon’s petty bourgeois schemes from the previous century. However whatever the strengths and weaknesses of these bodies were it is in a sense irrelevant. The whole question of revolution centres around who controls the state. Some anarchists may have fantasised that in their little commune the writ of the Republican state did not run but this was an illusion which was to be cruelly exposed after May 1937. Once again the Italian fraction had a clear reply.

*...historic experience has shown that there can be no question of collectivisation, of workers’ control, of socialist revolution before the abolition of the political power of the bourgeoisie.*⁶

All the bourgeoisie did was lie low or acquiesce in land and factory takeovers, awaiting the time when private property could be restored. The same Companys, President of the Generalitat or regional Government in Catalonia, who had so flattered the CNT leaders when the workers rising was at its height, later said of the CNT that

it has assumed the role, abandoned by the rebellious army, of controlling and protecting society and has become an instrument in the hands of the

democratic government.

the Italian Fraction saw through the bourgeois strategy as early as August 1936.

In Barcelona reality is hidden behind a façade. Because the bourgeoisie has temporarily withdrawn from the political scene, and because certain enterprises are being run without the bosses, some people have come to the conclusion that bourgeois political power no longer exists. But if it didn't really exist then we would have seen another power arise: the power of the proletariat. And here the tragic answer given by reality is very cruel. All the existing political formations, even the most extreme (the CNT), openly proclaim that there can be no question of attacking the capitalist state machine — for even headed by Companys it can be “of use” to the working class... Class struggle does not develop through a series of material conquests which leave the enemy's apparatus of power untouched, but through the outbreak of genuinely proletarian actions.

[“Against the Imperialist Front and Massacre of the Spanish Workers” in *Bilan* 34]

Genuine proletarian actions like the general strike in July 1936 which the CNT and UGT called off after 5 days in order to support the bourgeois government of the Republic in the “anti-fascist struggle”.

The POUM

But the CNT was not the only organisation which had the confidence of many workers and yet sold them short. To many who romanticise about the “Spanish Revolution” the best organisation was the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification, or the POUM, to use its Spanish acronym. Ken Loach's film *Land and Freedom*⁷, the writings of such as George Orwell, and the murder of their leader Andres Nin at the hands of the Stalinist secret police in Spain after May 1937, have all increased the prestige of the POUM in the eyes of many who look for a cause to support in the Spanish War. The reality is that the POUM (which was really only strong in Catalonia), although winning solid working class support through its campaign for wages rises and a 36 hour week, was as culpable as the CNT in leading the workers back into support for the bourgeois state. Even before the war, in January 1936, the POUM had joined with the Socialist, Stalinist and left bourgeois parties in the electoral block of the Popular Front. But, when the war broke out they lined up with the CNT in the strike and insurrection

against the military. When the anarchists called off the general strike, the POUM did the same two days later when the workers economic demands were met. Nin then accepted the post of Councillor of Justice in the Catalan Government and began to justify it with the following pieces of nonsense

The workers defeated fascism and were fighting for socialism... In Catalonia the dictatorship of the proletariat already exists... We were part of a profound social revolution in Spain; our revolution was more deep than that which swept through Russia in 1917.

[From the POUM paper *La Battalla*, quoted in *The War in Spain*, January 1937]

The illusion that the revolution was going forward and that the workers were in control (because the POUM were in the Catalan Government!) was to prove costly to the POUM. International imperialist rivalry also played a part in their demise. In the USSR, Stalin was determined to wipe out the Bolshevik Old Guard and the thousands of other workers who still retained revolutionary ideas even after the decline and defeat of the revolution in Russia. This was the cause of the show trials and purges which were going on in Moscow at that very time. With imperialist war looming and Stalin seeking alliances in the West, the purges moved on to an international stage. The POUM's paper, *La Batalla*, carried more denunciations of the events in Moscow than any other, and in Moscow it was decided that they should be silenced. From the beginning, the PCE worked to crush the POUM. The PCE representatives in the Caballero Government and the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC) both demanded constantly that these “Trotskyist terrorists” “in alliance with fascism” should be arrested. In December 1936 Nin was forced out of the Catalan Government but Largo Caballero prevented any further steps against the POUM. This, and his refusal to unite the Socialist Party with the PCE (as had already happened in Catalonia where the PSUC had been formed) also sealed Largo Caballero's fate as Prime Minister.

The rise of the Spanish Communist Party

This brings us to the May 1937 events themselves. In July 1936, the PCE was a relatively small organisation of some 40 000 members. However, it was already gaining ground rapidly thanks to the policy of the Popular Front which had been adopted in 1935 at the Seventh Comintern Congress after the Nazi takeover in Germany. Now the aim was to

do deals with bourgeois parties in the democracies in order for the USSR to forge an alliance with the Western bourgeois regimes of Britain and France. It was just one more piece of evidence to demonstrate that the USSR was not a workers' state but part of the imperialist framework of capitalism. Just how sincere this policy was would be revealed in 1939 when Stalin did a *volte-face* and signed a deal with Hitler. It also shows that from the very beginning, as the Italian Fraction maintained all along, the so-called Spanish Civil War was an imperialist war. The only chance of breaking out of it was for the workers themselves to have turned this intra-bourgeois faction fight into a real civil war between classes. This would have been extremely difficult given the international situation of the world proletariat, which was still coming to terms with the defeat of the post-First World War revolutionary wave.

The rise of the PCE to become the dominant force on the Republican side is down to three factors. The lack of unity and cohesion on the side of the PSOE which led first one then another PSOE leader to seek a closer alliance with them. This was compounded by the fact that the British and French policy of "non-intervention" in the Spanish war meant that whilst Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy gave material support to Franco, only the USSR (and Mexico as far as it was able) gave arms and sent technical support to the Republic. The power this gave the local PCE over decisions in the Republican Government was enormous. And the final factor in the growth of the PCE was its outright opposition to any idea of revolution. On the international front, Stalin wanted to convince Britain and France that the Spanish Republic was a respectable bourgeois democracy so that they would abandon non-intervention (he did not realise the huge amount of support for Nazism and Fascism within the ruling class in those countries). Inside Spain the PCE came to the aid of the petty bourgeoisie. It even had an organisation in Catalonia for them (GEPCI), so that they could resist any attempts at collectivisation. The PCE daily *Mundo Obrero* (*Workers' World*) justified this in the following terms:

In a capitalist society, the small tradesmen and manufacturers constitute a class on the side of the democratic republic ... it is everybody's duty to respect the property of these small tradesman and manufacturers ... We therefore strongly urge the members of our party and the militia in general, to demand, and if need be, to enforce respect for these middle class citizens ...

Indeed, it is safe to say that the PCE became

the best defenders of the small capitalists in Spain and many petty bourgeois deserted their traditional parties (like Companys' *Esquerra*) for the PSUC in Catalonia and the PCE elsewhere. As the PSOE was so factionalised, the PCE was able to manoeuvre around it ("we played upon their suicidal antagonisms" later wrote Jesus Hernandez, a CPE Minister in the Largo Caballero Government). First, they had captured the PSOE youth base before the war, then they succeeded in getting the UGT and PSOE in Catalonia to unite in a CPE-led PSUC. By March 1937, they had the power base of 50000 members in Catalonia alone. But the move to finish off those workers' organisations which still deluded themselves that fighting the fascists also meant preserving the revolution had already begun.

The barricades of May 1937

Since September 1936, the Stalinists had been demanding the dissolution of the Central Anti-fascist Militia Committee and the concentration of power in the hands of Companys and the Catalan Government. The CNT and the POUM tried to argue against this, but, when told that arms from Madrid would not be forthcoming unless the committee was dissolved, they capitulated. Once again, the anti-fascist war took precedence over "the defence of the revolution". When the CNT leaders had allowed the Generalitat to stay in nominal power in order to fight the anti-fascist war, they consoled their followers that the real power lay in the Central Militia Committee. Now this was gone, their consolation was that the CNT and the POUM were represented in the bourgeois government. Still they maintained the illusion that the revolution existed. Now all that was left was armed militia who controlled security in Barcelona and were still CNT-dominated. Opposed to them were the *Asaltos* and the Republican guard which were controlled by the *comisario general de orden publico*, at that time headed by one of Companys' allies. The next step was the Stalinist campaign against the POUM. The smears that the POUM was "Trotskyist" and the even bigger smear that "Trotskyists" were in league with Hitler and fascists in general were the main instruments of the PSUC campaign. The PSUC demanded in November that Nin, the only POUM minister, be excluded from the cabinet. This provoked a three week long crisis as the CNT at first refused to agree to this. In the end, though the offer of a new cabinet post to the CNT, and the threat once again of a freezing of weapons supplies to Catalonia, led to their further capitulation. In another amazing piece of double-think the CNT

were also reassured by the resignation of the Stalinists as members of the cabinet under the label “PSUC” and the return of the same ministers as representatives of the “UGT”. The CNT now consoled themselves with two thoughts. The first was that the POUM were simply Marxists and therefore their rivalry with the PSUC was simply not of their concern. Never mind the fact that the POUM virtually shared their analysis of the situation in Spain. The second consoling thought was that, as the government was dominated by trades union organisations, it was now a “syndicalist” one!

However, the most significant result of the December crisis was the appointment of the one-armed ex-anarchist, ex-POUMist, Rodriguez Salas⁸ who was a PSUC stalwart as *comisario general de orden publico*. With Salas in a key post in Barcelona, the PSUC now began to campaign for an end to the militias and the formation of a regular army with compulsory military service. The aim was obvious — to disarm the working class who had weapons in Barcelona and complete the restoration of the monopoly of power of the bourgeois state. Under pressure from the central government in Valencia (the no more weapons trick again), and against the opposition of the CNT, the Catalan Government agreed to take the first steps towards forming a regular army in Catalonia, by putting its forces under the control of the defence ministry in Valencia. The CNT now walked out of the Catalan Government provoking a new crisis. On April 7th 1937, the PSUC and UGT proposed a “victory plan” which was nothing less than the total submission of all workers militias and organisations to the bourgeoisie under the slogan “without authority there can be no victory”. The CNT at last belatedly realised that “we have already made too many concessions and believe that the time has come to turn off the tap”.⁹ May Day was approaching but the idea that the UGT dominated by Stalinists and the CNT anarcho-syndicalists could hold a joint demonstration was abandoned. The thousand anarchist militiamen who, worried about political developments in Barcelona, and had abandoned the front in March to set up the “Friends of Durruti”, plastered Barcelona with slogans calling for “all power to the working class”. These were supported by editorials in the POUM’s paper *La Batalla*.

Bourgeois histories now tell us that there is confusion about what happened next but there is no doubt that the May events were sparked by the Stalinists. Rodriguez Salas, with three truckloads of *Asaltos* (some 200 men) loyal to the Catalan

Government, tried to occupy the Telephone Exchange on the Plaza de Cataluña on May 3rd 1937. This had been occupied by the CNT and the UGT on July 19th 1936, and its occupation was confirmed by the then powerless *Generalitat*. It was strategically significant post, allowing the unions to monitor all telephone calls in the city) including to Companys, and to the President of the Republic, Manuel Azaña, who had fled to Barcelona. Salas and his crew succeeded in entering the building but were stopped as they tried to reach the upper floors. This provocation led to a general strike throughout the city, workers took to the streets and hundreds of barricades were set up in every working class district. Everyone from Azaña to Abad de Santillan, the FAI leader,¹⁰ agrees that “the anarchists were masters of the city” at this point, but as Abad de Santillan also made clear the CNT-FAI leadership did not go on the offensive.

Instantaneously, nearly the whole of Barcelona was in the power of our armed groups. They did not move from their posts, although they could have done so easily and overcome the small centres of resistance.

As to recognising that a struggle for power was going on he maintains the anarchists were not interested in defeating the Stalinists

...this did not interest us, for it would have been an act of folly contrary to our principles of unity and democracy.

Could there be a more blatant statement that there is no halfway house between the class struggle and capitulation to the democratic bourgeoisie in the anti-fascist cause? In a sense the anarchists were caught in a cleft stick as victory in Barcelona would have meant a civil war within the civil war against the Central Government (which still had three anarchist ministers!). The notion that you defeat the fascist (one section of the ruling class) in favour of democracy (another section of the same class) and then you re-start the class war has no logic to start with but history has given fewer more obvious lessons of the folly of such a policy than the Spanish events. The masses were on the streets, the Friends of Durruti called for resistance (in the name of defence of a revolution which had never been consummated — this was their illusion and had been nurtured by both the CNT and POUM since July 19th 1936). POUM called its spontaneous response to the Stalinist provocation and said the choice was revolution or counter-revolution. But, as

we demonstrated above, it was a counter-revolution in which the CNT and the POUM and played their parts in preparing. Even now, the CNT looked for compromise and told its militants to remain on the defensive whilst the Stalinists plotted their next move. They had already called for 1500 extra assault guards from Valencia but Largo Caballero prevaricated as he still hoped that a “negotiated solution” could be found. From now on all the Stalinists had to do was fire a few shots from the Hotel Colòn and a day long fusillade of shots would fill the city but

Most of the combatants remained in buildings or behind barricades and blazed away at their enemies opposite.¹¹

In other words, there was no attempt to flush the small minority of Stalinists out. And as long as the shooting continued the Stalinists could put pressure on Largo Caballero to send troops. Largo Caballero resisted as long as possible and sent a delegation made up of anarchist and socialist Ministers to Barcelona to negotiate a cease-fire. The anarchists Federica Montseny and Mariano Vázquez brokered the deal as well as getting local CNT committees to agree to allow Popular Front troops to pass through Catalonia without being attacked by local militia.

The sorry consequences of class collaboration

The CNT were now totally trapped by the policy of support for the anti-fascist war and by the afternoon of May 4th they were calling on their supporters to stop fighting

Workers! ... We are not responsible for what is happening. We are attacking no-one. We are only defending ourselves ... Lay down your arms! Remember, we are brothers! ... If we fight amongst ourselves we are doomed to defeat.¹²

In reality, these were not brothers but class enemies that the Barcelona proletariat was faced with, and the idea that “they were doomed to defeat” if they resisted the Stalinists only once again shows that the priority was to fight the anti-fascist war, and not the class war. Many anarchists try to portray the defeat of the May Days as the simple result of “Marxist manipulation”, equating Stalinism with Marxism, but the events also show that many “Marxists” in Barcelona in the POUM and in the Bolshevik-Leninists (i.e. Trotskyists) were much more prepared to resist than the CNT leadership. However even these organisations, as shown above,

had fostered illusions in the anti-fascist struggle, and as the Italian Fraction always reminds us was still part of the Popular Front Government which brought about the May massacres. The only really Marxist and internationalist position was taken up by the Italian Fraction as the document translated here from *Bilan* demonstrates. The fact was that the feebleness of anarchist theory was fully revealed by the inadequacy of the CNT-FAI both in July 1936, and again in May 1937. In reality, in May 1937 there was little hope of overturning what had already been decided in July 1936. The CNT-FAI was wedded to anti-fascism and the Popular Front and could not escape its consequences. When the Friends of Durruti called for a revolutionary junta on May 6th the CNT-FAI leaders denounced them as agents provocateurs and on May 7th the appeal went out, “Comrades, return to work”. That evening the assault guards arrived from Valencia and the Stalinist terror was about to be visited on Catalonia.

Indeed it had already begun. The *Bilan* text which follows mentions Camillo Berneri. Berneri was an Italian anarchist who edited a paper *Guerra di Classe (Class War)* which criticised both the CNT participation in the Popular Front and the Comintern’s increasingly reactionary influence in Spain. On the night of 5th-6th May members of the PSUC took him away along with his co-worker Francisco Barbieri. Their bodies were found a day or so later riddled with machine gun bullets. The same fate was to befall Andre Nin and other POUM leaders, though in Nin’s case, he was “disappeared” and his body never found, presumably because he has been badly tortured to make him confess to being “a fascist spy”, so that a Spanish version of the show trials could be held. The Stalinists always maintained that his disappearance was a mystery.

Overall the incredible had happened. The CNT was defeated in Catalonia and the Stalinists were now on the rampage.

In succeeding weeks, the story of Catalonia was one of mass arrests, of detentions in clandestine gaols, of tortures, kidnappings and assassinations, as well as the destruction of the agricultural and urban collectives.

But, even now, the CNT and FAI leadership only complained “barbarous repression” but still called for “discipline and a sense of responsibility” from their followers!¹³ In other words they wanted nothing to be done which might rock the Popular Front. It was now, in any case, too late, as what the

Italian Fraction had predicted in August 1936 had come to pass. The capitalist state had never been smashed and therefore there was no real revolution to defend. The village committees which had carried out social experiments, with varying degrees of success, were now smashed by the arrival of troops in every area to restore property rights. All the consequences of the original failure to smash the capitalist state in July 1936 were now being visited on the workers of Catalonia. Even George Orwell who had been so impressed by the outwardly proletarian character of Barcelona at the end of 1936 now understood that the bourgeois can adopt proletarian forms.

*I did not realise that great numbers of well-to-do bourgeois were simply lying low and disguising themselves as proletarians for the time being.*¹⁴

What he did not understand was that the Stalinists were part of the world imperialist order and that they too stood for property rights wherever it was useful for the defence of the Soviet Union. Spain helped to open the eyes of many to the fact that the Soviet Union was now part of the world imperialist order, something that was to be confirmed by the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939. To the comrades of the Italian Fraction it also seemed have completed the task of theoretical clarification which they had set themselves. At the end of the article which follows they called for unity of all the fractions in an International Bureau to prepare for the formation of a new world proletarian party. They had, however, confused their own increasing clarity about where they stood in relation to the world working class with the willingness and material possibility of the world working class resisting the coming imperialist war. This failure was to lead to paralysis and a collapse of the Fraction in the face of the war. It was in Italy towards the end of the Second World War that other comrades of the Fraction, led by Onorato Damen and Luciano Stefanini amongst others, were to raise the banner which they had temporarily dropped. It is that same banner that today's International Bureau keeps alive today.

Notes

1 Some of the earlier texts on Spain from *Bilan* were published in translation in 1976 by the International Communist Current. These can be found on their website and include "Against the Imperialist Front and the Massacre of the Spanish Workers" (from *Bilan* 34, August-September 1936)

which demonstrates the same clarity at the start of the war as the Italian fraction held at the time of the May 1937 events.

2 For more on the history of the Italian Left in English, see our pamphlet on the Platform of the *Committee of Intesa*.

3 Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (Pelican ed., 1968), p194.

4 Or Holy Alliance. The term originally comes from the French situation in 1914 when the French Socialist Party and the unions called off the class war in favour of support for the imperialist war.

5 Vernon Richards, *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution*, p107.

6 From *The War in Spain* from the internal bulletin of the Italian Fraction. Originally published in English in *Revolutionary Perspectives* 5 (first series) it has been out of print for some time.

7 See our review of this film in *Revolutionary Perspectives* 1 (current series).

8 He was actually a former member of the larger of the two organisations, the Workers and Peasants Bloc of Joaquin Maurin which had joined to form the POUM in 1934. Maurin was murdered by Franco's men. Ironically, Rodriguez Salas had lost his arm taking part in an anarchist bank robbery in Tarragona in 1917.

9 Quoted in B. Bolloten, *The Spanish Revolution* (Chapel Hill NC 1979), p396.

10 The FAI were the Iberian Anarchist Federation, the political organisation which dominated Spanish anarchism. The CNT (National Confederation of Labour) was the syndicalist wing of this movement (which in many sources is referred to as the CNT-FAI).

11 Bolloten, p408.

12 loc. cit.

13 Bolloten, p455.

14 *Homage to Catalonia*, Penguin, 1966, p9.

Bullets, Machine Guns and Prison:

That's the Popular Front's Response to the Workers Who Dare to Resist Capitalist Attacks.

*From Bilan, Theoretical Monthly Bulletin of the Italian
Fraction of the Communist Left, No. 41 (May-June 1937)*

Proletarians!

On July 19th 1936, the workers of Barcelona crushed the attacks of Franco's battalions who were **armed to the teeth with their bare fists**.

On May 4th 1937, these same workers **now supplied with weapons** left more of their number dead in the streets than they did in July, when they had to repel Franco, but now it is the anti-fascist government — containing the anarchists, with the indirect support of the POUM — which has unleashed the scum of the repressive forces against the workers.

On July 19th the proletarians of Barcelona were an invincible force. Their class struggle freed it from all links with the bourgeois state, and had repercussions within the Francoist ranks, leading to their disintegration and awakening the class instincts of the soldiers: this was the strike that halted Franco's rifles and cannons and broke up his offensive.

History doesn't just record those momentary episodes in the course of which the proletariat acquires its full autonomy from the capitalist state. In the days after July 19th, the Catalan

proletariat reached a crossroads. Either it would go on to a **higher phase** in its struggle, since the bourgeois state was destroyed, or capitalism would rebuild its apparatus of domination. At this stage of the struggle where class instinct is no longer enough, or where **consciousness** becomes the decisive factor, the proletariat can only win if it is prepared with the theoretical capital, patiently and relentlessly accumulated by its left fractions raised up as political parties, under the pressure of events. If today the Spanish proletariat is also living through a dark tragedy, this is because of its lack of maturity to form its class party, the brains which alone can give it the force of life.

In Catalonia, from July 19th, the workers spontaneously created, on their class terrain, autonomous organs of struggle. But there immediately arose an agonising dilemma: either to take part in a more profound way in a political battle for the total destruction of the capitalist state, and thus to complete their economic and military successes, or to leave the oppressive machinery of the enemy still standing, and allow it to adulterate and liquidate the workers' gains.

Classes struggle with the means which the situation and the degree of social tension imposes upon them. In the face of a class conflagration capitalism cannot even dream of a recourse to the classical methods of legality. What frightened it was the independence of the proletarian struggle which prepared the way for the next revolutionary stage, that of the abolition of bourgeois domination. Capitalism had to revive the instruments of its control over the exploited. These instruments which had formerly been the judiciary, the

police, and the prisons, in the extreme situation of Barcelona, the Militia Committees, the socialised industries, the workers' unions managed the commanding heights of the economy, the vigilance patrols, etc.

Thus, history posed again in Spain the problem which in Italy and Germany had already been resolved with the crushing of the proletariat: the workers preserve for their class the tools which they have created in the struggle only in so far as they turn them against the bourgeois state. The workers arm their future hangmen if, lacking the strength to beat their class enemies, they let themselves be drawn once again into the net of their domination.

On July 19th the proletarian militia was a proletarian body. A week later the "proletarian militia" was a capitalist body appropriate to the situation as it then stood. And to carry out its counter-revolutionary plan the bourgeoisie appealed to the Centrists, the Socialists, to the CNT and the FAI and to the POUM, who all led the workers to believe that **the State changes when the personnel which direct it change**. Disguised in the folds of the red flag, capitalism patiently sharpened its sword of repression, which by 4th May was prepared by all the forces which had already broken the back of the Spanish workers struggle on the 19th July.

Noske's offspring was the Weimar Constitution and Hitler, Giolitti and the "management of production" led to Mussolini, and the offspring of the Spanish anti-fascist front, of its "socialisations", of its "proletarian" militias, is the carnage in Barcelona on 4th May.¹



And only the Russian proletariat responded to the fall of Tsarism with October 1917 because it alone succeeded in building a class party through the work of its left fractions.

Proletarians

It was in the shadow of the Popular Front Government that Franco was able to prepare his attack. It was in the way of conciliation that on July 19th Barrios had tried to form a single ministry allowing the whole of Spanish capital to carry out its programme, whether under the leadership of Franco, or under a mixed leadership of right and left fraternally united.² But it was the revolt of the workers in Barcelona, Madrid, in Asturias which forced capitalism to double up its government, and to share out its functions between its republican and military agents, linked by an indissoluble class solidarity.

In those areas where Franco couldn't gain an immediate victory, capitalism called on the workers to follow it in order to "defeat fascism". In this bloody trap of believing that led by the Republicans they could crush capitalism's other legitimate offspring, fascism, they have paid with thousands of corpses. And they left for the hills of Aragon, the mountain of the Guadarrama and Asturias to win victory in the anti-fascist war³.

Once again, as in 1914, it is on the gravestones of the proletariat that History inscribes, in bloody deeds, the intrinsic opposition between bourgeoisie and proletariat. The military fronts: a necessity imposed by the situation? No! A necessity for capitalism in order to surround and crush the workers! The 4th May 1937 brought the clear proof that, after July 19th, the proletariat should have fought Companys, Giral as much as Franco⁴. The military fronts were only the gravediggers of the workers because they represented the front line of capitalism's war against the proletariat. In this war the Spanish proletariat, following the example of their Russian brothers in 1917, should have adopted revolutionary defeatism against both bourgeois camps, republican and fascist, and transformed the capitalist war into a civil war with the aim of the

total destruction of the bourgeois state.

The Italian Fraction of the Left in its tragic isolation has only been supported by League of Internationalist Communists of Belgium who have founded the Belgian fraction of the international communist Left. Alone, these two currents have sounded the alarm whenever and wherever the need to safeguard the gains of the revolution, or of beating Franco the better to defeat Largo Caballero later, has been proclaimed.

The latest events in Barcelona have ominously confirmed our original thesis and they reveal that the Popular Front, flanked by the anarchists and the POUM, has thrown itself against the insurgent workers of May 4th with a cruelty equalling that of Franco.

The outcomes of the military battles have given so many opportunities for the Republican Government to tighten its grip on the exploited. In the absence of a proletarian policy of revolutionary defeatism, the success and the failures of the Republican army have just been stages in the bloody defeat of the working class: at Badajoz, Irun, San Sebastian⁵, the Republic of the Popular Front makes its contribution to the concerted massacre of the proletariat to further tighten the grip of the *Union Sacrée* (Holy Alliance), as, in order to win the antifascist war, a disciplined and centralised army is needed. The resistance in Madrid on the other hand allowed the Popular Front to go on the offensive and rid itself of its former servant, the POUM, and thus prepare the May 4th attack. The fall of Malaga revives the bloody threads of the

B I L A N

Bulletin théorique mensuel de la
Fraction italienne de la Gauche communiste

N° 41

Plomb, Mitraille, Prison :

**Ainsi répond le Front Populaire aux ouvriers
de Barcelone osant résister à l'attaque capitaliste**

PROLÉTAIRES!

Le 19 juillet 1936, les prolétaires de Barcelone, AVEC LEURS POINGS NUS, osèrent l'attaque des bataillons de Franco, ARMES JUSQU'ÀUX DENTS.

Le 4 mai 1937, ces mêmes prolétaires, MUNIS D'ARMES, laissent sur le pavé bien plus de victimes qu'en juillet, lorsqu'ils doivent repousser Franco et c'est le gouvernement antifasciste — comprenant jusqu'aux anarchistes et dont le POUM est indirectement solidaire — qui déclenche la racaille des forces répressives contre les ouvriers.

Le 19 juillet, les prolétaires de Barcelone sont une force invincible. Leur lutte de classe, affranchie des liens de l'Etat bourgeois, se répercute au sein des régiments de Franco, les désagrège et réveille l'instinct de classe des soldats: c'est la grève qui enrayera fusils et canons de Franco et qui brise son offensive.

L'histoire n'enregistre que des intervalles fugitifs au cours desquels le prolétariat peut acquérir son autonomie entière vis-à-vis de l'Etat capitaliste. Quelques jours après le 19 juillet, le prolétariat catalan arrive à la croisée des chemins: ou bien il entre dans la PHASE SUPÉRIEURE de sa lutte en vue de la destruction de l'Etat bourgeois ou bien le Capitalisme reconstitue les mailles de son appareil de domination. A ce stade de la lutte où l'instinct de classe ne suffit plus et où la CONSCIENCE devient le facteur décisif, le prolétariat ne peut vaincre que s'il dispose du capital théorique accumulé patiemment et avec acharnement par ses fractions de gauche érigées en partis sous l'explosion des événements. Si, aujourd'hui, le prolétariat espagnol vit une aussi sombre tragédie, c'est dû à son immaturité à forger son parti de classe: le cerveau qui, SEUL, peut lui donner force de vie.

En Catalogne, dès le 19 juillet, les ouvriers créent spontanément, sur leur terrain de classe, les organes autonomes de leur lutte. Mais, immédiatement, surgit l'angoissant dilemme: ou engager à fond la BATAILLE POLITIQUE pour la destruction totale de l'Etat capitaliste et parachever ainsi les succès (économiques et militaires, ou bien laisser debout la machine oppressive de l'ennemi et lui permettre alors de dénaturer et de liquider les conquêtes ouvrières.

Les classes luttent avec les moyens qui leur sont imposés par les situations et le degré de tension sociale. En face d'un incendie de classe, le Capitalisme ne peut même pas songer à recourir aux méthodes classiques de la légalité. Ce qui le menace, c'est l'INDEPENDANCE de la lutte prolétarienne conditionnant l'autre

Union Sacrée whilst the military victory of Guadalajara⁶, which opens this period, ends with the firing squads in Barcelona.

At the same time, Spanish capitalism's war of extermination supports international bourgeois repression in every country, and the fascist and anti-fascist deaths accompany the Moscow murders, and the shootings in Clichy⁷. It is also on the bloody altar of anti-fascism that the traitors gathered the workers of Brussels around capitalist democracy in the 11th April 1937 elections.

"Arms for Spain": this has been the main slogan which has resounded in the ears of the proletariat. And these arms have shot their brothers in Barcelona. Soviet Russia in cooperating with the arming of the anti-fascist war has also represented the capitalist framework in the recent carnage. On the orders of Stalin – who showed his rabid anti-communism on March 3rd – the PSUC of Catalonia took the lead in the massacre.

Once again, as in 1914, the workers used arms to kill each other instead of using them for the destruction of the regime of capitalist oppression.

Proletarians!

On 4th May 1937 the workers of Barcelona have resumed the path which they had followed on July 19th and which capitalism had been able to reject by leaning on the support of the multiple forces of the Popular Front. In unleashing their strike, especially in the sectors presented as **gains of the revolution**, the workers had made a stand against the republican-fascist bloc of capitalism. And the Republican government responded with even greater savagery than Franco at Badajoz or Irun. If the Salamanca Government⁸ has not exploited this shock on the Aragon Front to push forward an attack this is because it felt that its leftwing accomplice was admirably fulfilling its role as the hangman of the proletariat.

Exhausted by six months of war, of class collaboration by the CNT, the FAI and the POUM the Catalan proletariat was wiped out by a terrible defeat. But this defeat is also a step towards

tomorrow's victory, a moment in the proletariat's emancipation because it signals the death blow to all the ideologies which have allowed capitalism to safeguard its domination in spite of the huge leap of July 19th.

No, the fallen proletarians on May 4th cannot be called upon by any of the currents who on July 19th dragged them away from their class terrain in order to throw them into the abyss of anti-fascism. The fallen proletarians belong to the proletariat, and only to it. They represent the brain tissues of the world working class, of the class party of the communist revolution.

The workers of the whole world bow in front of all the dead and claim their corpses against all the traitors: those of yesterday as of today. The whole world proletariat salutes in Berneri, one of themselves and his sacrifice to the anarchist ideal is yet one more protest against a political school which has collapsed in the course of the Spanish events: that is under the leadership of a government with anarchist participation whose police have repeated on the body of Berneri the exploits of Mussolini on the body of Matteotti!⁹

Proletarians!

The carnage in Barcelona is the forerunner of even more bloody repression of the workers in Spain and throughout the whole world. But it is also the harbinger of social storms which will break over the capitalist world.

Capitalism, in only ten months, has had to exhaust the political resources on which it was counting to commit to the destruction of the working class and to blocking the work which that class was accomplishing to found its class party, the main weapon of its emancipation and of the construction of a communist society. Centrism and anarchism, in rejoining social-democracy have, in Spain, reached the end of their evolution, as was the case in 1914 when the war reduced the Second International to the status of a corpse.

In Spain, capitalism has unleashed a battle of international significance: the battle between fascism and anti-

fascism which, in the ultimate form of weapons, announces an acute class tension in the international arena.

The deaths in Barcelona have cleared the ground for the construction of the working class party. All the political forces which called the workers to struggle for the revolution, to engage them in a capitalist war, have all passed to the other side of the barricade. Before the workers of the entire world a luminous horizon is opening up where the dead of Barcelona have written in their blood the class lesson already traced out in the blood of the dead of 1914-18: **the workers struggles are proletarian only on condition that they are directed against capitalism and its state; they serve the interests of the enemy, if the proletarian bodies which the situation gives rise to, are not directed against that enemy, at all times, in all places and in all forms.**

The world proletariat will struggle against capitalism even when that has gone over to the repression of its former servants. It is the working class, and never its class enemy, which has to settle accounts with those who have expressed a phase of its evolution, a moment of its struggle for emancipation from capitalist slavery.

The international battle which Spanish capitalism is engaged in against the proletariat opens up a new international chapter in the life of the fractions of all countries. The world proletariat, which has to continue its struggle against the "builders" of artificial Internationals, knows that it can only found a proletarian International through a global upheaval in class relations, opening the way to the communist revolution, and only thus. Faced with the war in Spain which foretells revolutionary birth pangs in other countries, the world proletariat feels that the moment has arrived to establish the first international links of the fractions of the communist left.

Proletarians of All Countries!

Your class is invincible; it represents the motor force of the evolution of history: the events in Spain have proved it because it is **only** your class which can provide a way out of a

struggle which convulses the whole world!

It is not defeat which can discourage you; from this defeat you will draw the lessons for your victory tomorrow!

On a class basis you will rebuild your class unity beyond all frontiers and against all the mystifications of the capitalist enemy!

In Spain, respond to the attempts a compromise, which tend to establish a peace for capitalist exploitation, with the fraternisation of the exploited of both armies for a simultaneous struggle against capitalism!

Stand up for the revolutionary struggle in every country!

Long live the workers of Barcelona who have turned a new bloody page in the book of world revolution!

Forward to the constitution of an International Bureau with the aim of promoting the formation of left fractions in every country!

Raise the banner of communist revolution which the fascist and anti-fascist hangmen could not prevent the defeated proletarians from passing on to their class heirs.

Be worthy of our fallen brothers!

Long live the world wide communist revolution!

The Belgian and Italian Fractions of the International Communist Left

Notes

1. Noske was the leading member of the German Social Democratic Party which had supported the Kaiser in the First World War. In 1919 he recruited some of the Kaiser's former troops as Freikorps to crush the Spartakist Revolt against the Weimar Republic. It was the first act of "National Socialism" in defence of bourgeois rule. Many of the members of Hitler's Nazi Party came from the same milieu as the Freikorps. In a wider sense, the defeat of 1919 paved the way for the Nazi overthrow of the Weimar Republic in 1933. Giolitti was the Italian Liberal Prime Minister who gave the Fascist Party 35 seats in Parliament as part of a coalition of the Right in 1921 as reward for their role in defeating the factory occupations in Turin. This was the springboard for their demand for power the following year, which was quietly accepted by the monarchy. The reference to the "management of production" refers to how the state operation of industry during the war became a model for the form of state capitalism in Italy which Mussolini called "the corporate state"

2. For the details of this, see the opening page of the introduction to this text

3. These were the main battle fronts. The Sierra de Guadarrama was west of Madrid, the Aragon front was before Zaragoza which was in Franco's hands, and the northern front of the Asturias was near Santander and Oviedo

4. For explanations of the Spanish characters in this text, see our historical introduction

5. All early victories for the Francoists. Badajoz was a particularly brutal event with thousands of workers shot in cold blood afterwards.

6. The Battle of Guadalajara took place in March 1937 and was a rare Popular Front success in that it prevented the encirclement of Madrid as well as demonstrating direct Italian Fascist involvement in the war.

7. French workers occupying a factory in Clichy as part of a campaign of sit-in strikes in 1936, were forcibly removed by the Popular Front Government of Leon Blum using the Army. Five workers were gunned down and a general strike followed. The Moscow murders is a reference to Stalin's show trials which started in earnest in the same year

8. Franco's headquarters at the time were in Salamanca

9. Camillo Berneri was an Italian anarchist who being forced to leave Fascist Italy, wandered around Europe (doing time in a Belgian prison), until the outbreak of the civil war when he organised a column of Italian anarchists, although he did not join this himself as he produced the paper Class War. For his murder see the introduction to this text. For Matteotti, the Socialist MP murdered by Fascist thugs see "The Matteotti Murder" in Revolutionary Perspectives 33

The Communist Left Fractions, Trotskyism and Counter-revolution

**(introduction to extracts from *Octobre*
1938 re-published from *Internationalist
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The Communist (or Third) International was founded in Moscow in 1919. Its proclamation was the work of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) Party, assisted by those communists from other countries who happened to be able to beat the imperialist blockade to reach Moscow. Even when, in 1920 and 1921 really representative organisations of the working class throughout the world were able to rally to the Comintern it remained a Russian-dominated body. This was understandable given the enormous prestige of the Russian Party in actually overthrowing its own ruling class. In practical terms the seat of a proletarian international has to be where the proletariat runs the state. However, as Lenin himself saw, this has clear dangers. Not only did the problems of extending the revolution to capitalist countries with a more sophisticated ruling class tend to be posed in Russian terms but when the Russian Party, through the failure of the world revolution to materialise, began to manage a state capitalist regime, this was to gradually undermine the Communist International. From being a body whose task was to extend world revolution it became, by 1926, a kind of appendage of the Russian Foreign Ministry.

This degeneration, both inside the Russian party and state, and in the Comintern, created a number of oppositions. The two most substantial of these from a working class point of view were those of Trotsky and the Italian Communist Party, which until 1924 was headed by its founders from the leftwing of the old Italian Socialist party headed by Amadeo Bordiga.

The two brief articles which are translated and reprinted here are taken from *Octobre*, the monthly organ of the International Bureau of the Fractions of the Communist Left. This organisation, which despite many errors was one of the predecessors of the Internationalist Communist Party which was founded fifty years ago. It still publishes *Battaglia Comunista* and *Prometeo* today. It is the main inspiration of the present International Bureau for the Revolutionary Party of which *Internationalist*

Communist Review is the central organ.

The first article gives a brief outline of the origin of the communist left after the Stalinists had taken over the Comintern and expelled all the oppositions (including both the Trotskyists and our antecedent organisations). In the 1920s the Italian Left Communists were in fact offered a deal by Zinoviev that if they joined in the campaign against Trotsky they could retain the leadership of the Italian Party. This was rejected on principle, a principle not reciprocated by Trotsky in the 1930s when he was seeking to build his own opposition. Despite having declared the basic documents of the Italian Left excellent he deliberately and systematically undermined any attempt of the two oppositions to work together, preferring phantom committees directly beholden to himself than real emanations of the working class.

Despite this the Fractions of the Communist Left continued to regard Trotsky as working class opponent of Stalin even if he committed opportunist errors (such as the attempts to work inside the French Socialist Party in 1935-6). The second article, written in 1938 shows how things had changed. The so-called Spanish Civil War was in fact the first round of the second imperialist war and after having dealt with opportunists in their own ranks the Fraction now analysed the positions of Trotsky. By putting the defence of the Spanish Republic as the basis of his strategy of so-called "permanent revolution" Trotsky had gone over to one side in an imperialist war in contravention of Lenin's call for revolutionary defeatism. The perception that Trotsky (who had written under the names Gurov and Crux) had crossed the barricades accounts for the bitterness and irony in the second article.

An Outline of the History of the Italian Fraction of the International Communist Left

It was officially formed at the Pantin Conference¹ in 1928 when the Communist International (CI), after innumerable expulsions of international communists from every country, finally decreed in its VI Congress that the defence of revolutionary positions and the CI were incompatible. In reality however the Italian Fraction had been formed throughout the civil war which resembled the struggles in Italy against centrism.

Towards the end of the 1914-18 war there appeared within the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), led by the opportunists of the famous “neither support, nor sabotage” formula at Zimmerwald,² the ‘abstentionists’ current led by Amadeo Bordiga and the Naples Federation which published “Il Soviet”. Under the banner of abstention from parliamentarism appeared the first marxist fraction which solidarised with the Russian Revolution, not just verbally but through the elaboration of communist positions. This made them the earliest proponents of a split with the class traitors (in the PSI) and the essential basis for the foundation of the Communist Party of Italy. In *Left-Wing Communism - An Infantile Disorder*, Lenin did the marxists of Italy little service in judging them on the basis of fragmentary and incomplete information, only on their position of parliamentary abstentionism, and in giving credit to the opportunists of *L'Ordine Nuovo* of Turin³. Abstentionism, which was an aspect of differentiation between communists and socialists in relation to the capitalist state, wasn't then a position of principle but rather a position analagous to that which the Bolsheviks defended in the Duma boycott shortly after the revolutionary assault of the Russian workers in 1906. Moreover it was the Bordigist Left which advocated in 1924 in a different situation with the rise of fascism, electoral participation.

In January 1921, the Abstentionist fraction which

had split with Serrati's Socialist Party founded the Communist Party at Livorno. The Italian situation had already been settled by the Socialist's betrayal. This had liquidated a huge movement of factory occupations unleashing the bloody attack of the fascists in conjunction with the repression of the capitalist state. Faced with fascism the Socialists and maximalists disarmed the Italian workers so that the forces of the State were able to go over to the physical elimination and destruction of workers organisations.

A year later the Communist Party of Italy, which regrouped the best energies of the Italian proletariat adopted the Rome Theses at its Second Congress. These in an abbreviated form summarised the basic principles which gave to the Italian working class their first real class party. The internal organisation of this party, its relationship to the class and with other organisations, its tactics in the period of war and revolution, were to be found in these Theses. The centrists pretended to accept them in 1923 in order that they could reject them as soon as they could do so with impunity and the help of the CI. Lets simply note here that the Theses only carried on along the historic path followed by Lenin from 1903 to 1917 meeting opposition in the Comintern though the CI didn't openly refute them in the Lenin period. It is true that in Germany the Spartakists were forced to follow a different course being pushed into fusion with the Independent Socialists (the USPD).

At the Third and Fourth Comintern Congresses the Italian Party, led by the Left, opposed the policy directives which had led to the German defeat of 1923, but which had received the support of Lenin, and especially, Trotsky. It was at the express demand of Lenin that Bordiga and the Left did not resign from the leadership of the Party, though in a majority at the Congress, because for

marxists it isn't possible to solve revolutionary problems in one country if in a minority internationally.

After the defeat of 1923 the Left turned down Zinoviev's offer to leave them at the head of the Italian Party in return for support in the campaign against Trotsky within the USSR. To be sure they disagreed with Trotsky over many issues but even so he represented an internationalist reaction to centrism⁴ and this compelled the Left to give him their total solidarity. This led therefore to the resignation of the Left from all positions of authority within the Party even though they still held a majority. It was the start of the ideological struggle which began with the formation of an opposition current that ultimately gave birth to our Left Fraction. In 1926 the marxist currents who, with Bordiga, were opposed to the adventures of the centrists (the Aventine Secession, for example⁵) and who fought in the international arena against "socialism in one country", Bolshevisation, the Anglo-Russian Committee, developed a programmatic document which was presented to a Congress of the Italian Party. This document is known under the name of *The Platform of the Left*

The Rome Theses (now rejected by the centrists) and *The Platform of the Left* served as founding documents at the formation of the Italian Fraction at Pantin. This produced an organ in Italian called *Prometeo* which still appears today.

When the International Left Opposition was formed in 1930 directed by Trotsky from his Turkish exile, the Italian fraction participated through its basic documents. Trotsky praised the 1926 Platform as one of the best documents of the Opposition, a fact which didn't prevent him from unleashing a campaign of manoeuvre and intrigue to bend the Fraction to his policies.

From January, 1932 the profound crisis of the International Left Opposition had deepened the differences between Trotsky's fraction which used bureaucratic methods to divide and dissolve groups, replacing the international leadership and attacking the Fraction which had refused to take part in a game that prevented the formation of communist bodies in different countries. The contrast between fidelity to the first four Congresses of the Communist International, the credo of Trotskyism, and the marxist analysis of events in the post-war period which saw the international triumph of centrism found its expression not only in opposition to the policy of "correcting the parties" and that of forming fractions working within the party as the sole channel of marxist thinking, but also in the opposition between "democratic slogans" which Trotsky employed to champion imperialist war in Spain and China and class positions which made the proletariat and proletarian positions the only

slogans corresponding to the post-war situation.

At the end of 1932, on the eve of Hitler's arrival in power the break occurred when Trotsky (under the name Gurov) who saw a possibility of a Communist victory in Germany even under Thaelmann⁶, proposed to exclude the Fraction.

In 1935 the Congress of the Italian Fraction was held after the open break of betrayal by centrism (following the definite end of the Comintern as a revolutionary force and the entry of the U.S.S.R. into the League of Nations). From a fraction of the Communist Party of Italy it now transformed itself into a fraction of a future party which would be created by revolutionary risings of the working class. This transformation took place as Italian imperialism launched a war against Abyssinia and the Congress focussed on the problems of the transformation of the Fraction into a Party which the betrayal of centrism and the opening up of a period of imperialist wars made imperative. A current emerged which wanted to substitute for the real process of the class struggle a process which would create the conditions for the formation of the Party, a voluntaristic generator of opportunism and of revision of the communist programme. The leading elements of this current had to form a minority which in the course of the war in Spain went on to support the imperialist war and thus passed to the other side of the barricades.

At the end of 1932 the Fraction had concluded a period of common work with the Belgian Internationalist Communist League on the basis of a similar critique of the positions of the Trotskyist International Opposition, a critique which took in the central questions of the workers movement, the state and the party.

Events in Spain brought about a crisis with the Fraction and its relations with the Belgian League in the middle of which a marxist current appeared which joined up with the marxist current which dominated the Fraction. The exclusion of the minority dominated the discussion and led to a break with the League where the split was confirmed (see the resolutions of the Executive Committee, *Bilan* No.42). Parallel with its collaboration with the Belgian League the Fraction published a theoretical review in November 1933 which began the task of internationalist clarification before pushing those groups of the proletarian vanguard who had broken with Trotsky to follow its example of forming groups of the communist left. At this time all attempts to form an International Bureau foundered on the passivity and confusion of the existing groups and only the League appeared willing to take part in a serious international discussion.

With the war in Spain all the differences with the

League and other groups was expressed in a collapse of the other groups into the swamp of capitalist ideology. A new phase opened, that of the formation of the Left Fraction against all the existing groups on the basis of the programmatic ideas proclaimed by the Fraction in common with the minority in the Belgian League on the state and on the party. This effort culminated in the formation of the Bureau of Left Fractions and the transformation of *Bilan* into *Octobre*.

At present the Italian Fraction produces *Prometeo* and, an organ of discussion in Italian, and acts as the instrument of preparation for the Congress of the Fraction.

Octobre 1 (February, 1938)

Notes

- 1 Pantin is a suburb on the east of Paris.
- 2 A conference of anti-war socialists split between the pacifists and centrists, and the Left led by Lenin who called for the imperialist war to be turned into a civil war. The PSI were able to hide behind their formula because at that time the Italian ruling class was divided as to which side to support in the imperialist war.
- 3 This is actually inaccurate. Although Lenin did make some vague critical remarks about

abstentionism in *Left Wing Communism*, it was not in that text that he praised Gramsci's *L'Ordine Nuovo*. Lenin's praise was reserved for the Turin section of the PSI's text which he singled out as the basis for a Communist Party in Italy at the Second Comintern Congress. In fact, this text, though drafted by Gramsci and appearing in *L'Ordine Nuovo* (8.5.1920) was edited by the entire Turin section which was in fact dominated by the Communist Fraction (ie. who owed their allegiance to Bordiga and the Left).

- 4 The term "centrist" was used by the Internationalist Communist Left to describe Stalinism until the Second World War when they finally clarified the capitalist nature of productive relations in Russia.
- 5 After the murder of the right-wing Socialist MP, Giacomo Matteoti in 1924 the PSI and the PCI left the Fascist-dominated Parliament (thus imitating the withdrawal of the Roman plebs to the Aventine Hill protesting against patrician arbitrary rule in the seventh century B.C.) The PCI at first supported the secession then went over to returning to the fascist parliament to use it as a forum of opposition. Such tactical shifts only undermined working class confidence in the PCI now led by Gramsci.
- 6 Leader of the German Communist Party (KPD) at this time. For more on this see the article on Germany in 1933 in this issue.



CWO pamphlet

Trotsky, Trotskyism, Trotskyists

Examines the course of how Trotsky, who made such an enormous contribution to revolutionary practice, ended up giving his name to a movement which returned to the errors of Social Democracy.

To order see inside back cover.

Octobre No. 3 April 1938

The Events in Spain: A Trotskyist Lesson

Everyone accepts that the war in Spain represents a decisive moment in the clarification of the political positions which the workers' movement has so far faced. The innermost nature and objective function of all currents claiming roots within the proletariat have been, in effect, unmasked by that war, and the lines of demarcation which have appeared between the different groups have been definitively consecrated by thousands of workers corpses buried in Iberian soil.

This is a time of "lessons" but only of class lessons. We have to rescue from the wholesale slaughter some ideological weapons so that a future revolutionary eruption won't end up in an imperialist war. Such a work of historical analysis cannot just be done by anyone. Its climate, the grounds on which it is based have been determined in advance, only those organisations which have not failed in their mission and have opposed the banner of revolution to that of imperialist war have kept a class nature which allows them to make this analysis and to arrive at a politically progressive solution.

Trotsky has openly involved himself in the discussions on the Spanish question. This he has done so "brilliantly" as a certain Cruz with all the profundity of the time of his polemic against the "left extremists" or that against the anarchists at the time of Kronstadt. It is well known, of course, that we know nothing of marxism and moreover, nothing of permanent revolution, whereas Trotsky alone sees all, knows all and can fire his "final warnings" at those traitors who, instead of linking the war and the revolution, ally themselves with the Popular Front against the workers (isn't this so Mr. Anarchist?). That clarification made we can start to examine the problems opened up by the Spanish War, and to confront the Trotskyist movement and Trotsky himself with class responses to these positions. Our ex-great man will excuse us if we take liberties regarding him but when someone betrays the interests of the working class they merit only contempt, even if they were one of the architects of October 1917.

Within the workers movement the only organisations attempting to examine the causes of bourgeois democracy's problems using class criteria have been the Left fractions. These fractions have reacted against the deformation of Lenin's thought, understanding it as revolutionary in its tactical relation to bourgeois democracy, neither doctrinally fixed nor a compromise between various extremes. Other strategists think that their politics are 'proven', wrongly believing that Lenin always recommended hiding in intermediate positions. They relate as much to the democratic bourgeoisie as to the proletariat, as capitalist reaction sweeps the whole of society. Similarly using the 'masterkey' of 'permanent revolution' Trotsky attempts another such manoeuvre, thinking that it takes revolutionary method onto some higher plane, to succeed finally in insurrection. We aren't talking about the centrists or socialists who had to move over to the defence of capitalism's democratic domination, some in 1914, others with the victory of Stalinism.

All too often we have proved that freedoms acquired by the proletariat and "democratic freedoms" are two antagonistic notions separated by a class divide. That workers in defending their press, their organisations haven't walked hand in hand with bourgeois democracy but have taken the road to victory over the latter. It would be pointless to go back over the subject here. The problem lies in that the dispute becomes exhausted in a series of events and two wars. The Trotskyist movement has somersaulted to the other side of the barricades, despite the subtleties of permanent revolution. Admittedly this wasn't the only problem but a complexity of problems which proved that on the central points of marxist doctrine (state, class, party, dictatorship of the proletariat, period of transition) Trotskyism, far from being a continuation of Lenin has passed over to empiricism and has deformed, like a caricature, the work of the Bolsheviks. The events in Spain require explanation...

Taking the facts which preceded the events ... at the time of the Ethiopian War, the criterion ap-

plied by Trotsky consisted of choosing the less reactionary of the belligerents so that in Spain Caballero was chosen over Franco transplanting the proletarian struggle there. The justification? The Fourth international seeks to guide by "materialist criteria" and "if they (the Trotskyists [ed.])² have supported, for example, Ethiopia, despite the slavery which is practised there and the barbarous political regime it is, firstly because for a pre-capitalist country, an independent national state is an historically progressive stage, secondly because the defeat of Italy would mean the beginning of the collapse of the capitalist regime 'which lived on'" (*Quatrieme Internationale* No. 1 p.9).

We know what has happened! This 'materialist criterion' has allowed the mobilisation of workers for war. The "permanent revolution" has not manifested itself, this is because the days of miracles are long passed despite the incantations of the Trotskyists. Spain must be seen as the application of this schema on a grand scale. The independent nation state, pawn of British imperialism was to be replaced by the democratic state. To defend their 'freedoms' (even the freedom of the anti-fascists imprisoned in Barcelona), the workers were urged to work alongside democracy, without forgetting the permanent revolution which, in the name of the Kornilov Affair, was to give them their victory. Here, though, we must look at things more closely.

The Centre for the Fourth International was constituted officially in July, 1936 after the exclusion of the Trotskyists from the Second International, and their reconstitution of the League of Internationalist Communists. It is certainly the strangest mixture we have ever seen. Could a marriage though between Trotsky and the left socialist groups produce anything other than a headless, foolless monster? The most important sections were to quickly become famous and thus attract the ire of Trotsky. The Belgians voted for the cleric, Van Zeeland, the lesser evil when faced with Degrelle. The Dutch have become the official advocates of the POUM, and the French, who, in July 1936 were inclined to such a position, diplomatically changed their point of view, without drawing breath. That Fourth International comic opera was to throw itself, during the Spanish War, with remarkable flair into the arms of the hard-line anti-fascists.

How was the problem posed? The workers of Barcelona struck back at Franco by launching a class struggle. The workers' parties turned themselves into a shield for the capitalist state and sent workers off to the battlefield. The universal cry was - beat Franco - and, without harming that fight, to realise social reforms, 'to make the revolution'. The central problem of the state was

conjured away. It wasn't only a 'facade'. Trotsky at this time had to bite his tongue, thanks to the attentions of the 'democratic' socialist ministers of Norway.³

It was then that the Trotskyist movement hit rock bottom by moving in the direction of the POUM and the anarchists. The directive was to enter the POUM and work to turn it leftwards. It would only be much later that the destruction of the state would be remembered.

Those charlatans of France and Belgium do not utter a word of protest - if they would like us to prove our criticisms of them and their positions then we can point to their own writings to do so.

Finally Trotsky starts to talk. The author of the permanent revolution has lost his eagle's wings and is now only a farmyard duck. In what was essentially an interview, he describes as cowards those who do not support the Republican army. Then we come to the theoretical justification of Mr. Crux, the shadow of a certain Gurov who, in 1932, forecast the possibility of a victory over Hitler even with Thälmann.⁴

"The victory of Caballero over Franco is not impossible!" This was written at the beginning of 1937, after the 'treasons' of the Republican military chiefs when, on different fronts, they failed to cripple Franco. We must also look at this position - "we have to aid the Republican troops with all our might" - if we are to be truly relevant. Oh, there is nothing to fear! Mr. Crux has the revolution in sight, but not following a republican victory. The theory of permanent revolution will be laid out before us - "in the epoch of imperialism democracy retains an advantage over fascism, in each case where they confront each other the revolutionary proletariat takes up the support for democracy against fascism." It is a question of exploiting the collision. But, as a supreme subtlety - "we will defend bourgeois democracy, not by bourgeois democratic means, but by the methods of the class struggle which prepares the replacement of bourgeois democracy by the dictatorship of the proletariat." To respond to such verbiage, while it is clear today that in Spain, as elsewhere, democratic forces, not so much colliding with the forces of fascism in a decisive manner, are joined by other currents for the massacre of the proletariat.

Moreover, this non-intervention has shown us that, even on the terrain of inter-imperialist competition, the democratic and fascist countries have been careful to absorb their confrontations so as to unify their efforts in finishing off the Spanish proletariat and imprisoning the workers of other countries in the Sacred Union.

Nevertheless Mr. Crux wishes to defend bourgeois

democracy by proletarian means. How? Although we have to evaluate the experiment made by the Trotskyists in Spain, what we question sharply is the sending of workers to the military fronts all in "proclamation" of the necessity for social struggle. So then, what do we hear from Crux - a politics he thinks worthy of the POUM, with the addition of advocating soviets and on top the verbal demagoguery we know so well. They don't even ask whether the proletariat could employ the means of the class struggle to defend bourgeois positions, whether in trying such, it does not quit its specific terrain and ends by leaping into the massacre of imperialist war. Why, in the epoch of imperialism, has democracy preserved for itself an advantage over fascism? and why, if the proletariat has the capacity to defend against fascism, does it not struggle for its own objectives directly? More concretely still - why has it been affirmed that Spanish workers are only capable of defeating Franco if they defend the bourgeois state and democracy? If that was true they would easily have been able to make the revolution because the state had placed itself under their 'protection'. We ask ourselves why didn't they do it? In reality though, even if it did not matter to us if the proletariat was dominated democratically or violently, the choice between forms of domination does not depend upon the will of the workers. Historical experience shows us that when workers are pushed to defend democracy, it benefits by making a bed for fascism. It is pure foolishness to invent a democratic "advantage", making the proletariat the champion of its own suicide, just as it is a permanent cretinism to believe that, after having struggled for bourgeois democracy, workers will move on to struggle for the revolution. In the Russian revolution, the April Theses were not inspired by a criterion similar to that which arose from the events of 1848 in France, and, moreover, in Russia a contradiction existed between the bourgeoisie and feudalism. Spain no longer has a bourgeois revolution to make and only the proletariat can resolve the economic problems that centuries of parasitism by the dominant classes has rendered insoluble by the Spanish bourgeoisie at present. For Crux though, the victory of the Republican armies would have provoked a certain explosion of civil war. His colleague Trotsky said the same thing concerning China, where he gravely explained that a victory for Chiang Kaishek would provoke a civil war in Japan. Conclusion - the Bolshevik-Leninists, banner unfurled, proud of their intransigence, defend the national independence of China along with the Kuomintang.

What remarkable 'marxists' are these, who ask proletarians to offer their lives for the bourgeoisie and who hope that the piles of corpses will lead naturally to insurrection at the moment of 'victory'. The Spanish example has no parallel - each military victory has been followed by a repression of

the workers. The May days of 1937 took place after the consolidation of the Republican army and the advance around Madrid. Lenin himself counted upon the defeats of Russian imperialism to orient the workers towards revolutionary defeatism. Trotsky-Crux count upon republican victories. But an army commanded by the bourgeois state is a capitalist army which has to be destroyed, as 'one' understood. The 'other' imagines that despite the bourgeois state it is possible to alter the nature of the army by propaganda without damaging the struggle against Franco.

In all of this the problem of the state is not approached seriously, as if the Commune and October 1917 had not existed, but is replaced by considerations of 'strategy', empty of any sense without the leadership of councils which it is necessary to create to push the struggle onwards.

In May 1937, the Centre for the Fourth International published a resolution on Spain. Within the Trotskyist groupings divergences occurred not on the basis of the Spanish problem itself, but on support for the POUM while struggling against its politics. Trotsky had given the signal to attack those POUMists within the Generalitat - the Bolshevik-Leninists were going, in the land of Don Quixote, off to tilt at windmills, to found their 'Spanish' section.

The resolution likened the May days of 1937 to July 1917 in Russia. Where is the party to prepare for October? No trace could be found because the workers have been betrayed by their own parties and by the repression aimed at making understood that the capitalist state is not an insignificant 'facade' and that it could create a respect for order. For the Trotskyists, the deviation of the Spanish revolution dates from the moment when the militias were militarised and the workers' committees were dissolved. Alas! but did that revolution exist when workers were unable to struggle for the defeat of the capitalist state? Of course the revolt during those first days had a sense of glory and a class character, but the militia were the channels carrying the workers off to the imperialist war. For these gentlemen

the most important problem rested with forging a bolshevik leadership in the heat of battle, which will have assimilated the lessons of past errors and will know, in continuing the armed struggle against Franco, how to mobilise the masses effectively in the committees and to raise them up against the bourgeois state, to smash it at the opportune moment (our emphasis - ed.) by insurrection...

The Trotskyists look to forge a party "in the heat of battle", as if Lenin had never existed and also that historical experience which shows us that a

party can not create itself out of the smallest Trotskyist section, but is the result of a selection of ideas, of cadres, of an evolution of events, the “heat of battle” is the decisive test for these groupings, not the time of its creation. Further, to insist on wishing to continue the struggle against Franco on a **capitalist terrain** and to mobilise workers in their **class terrain** - are these people able to explain how we can manage to do two different things, totally opposed, at the same time? Facts remain facts, do they not? The POUM has sung that song, performing it first in the ministries, then in the prisons. The anarchists have had to understand that it was necessary to go to war without musing over the revolution. So then, are the Trotskyists waiting to pick up posts in a capitalist state, some of them realising that their prattling is only a vile brainwashing?

The conclusion is simply all formula. It is necessary to destroy the state “at the opportune moment”. Ah! as we all know, that formula is dear to reformists. But who will decide that ‘opportune moment’? The events without doubt! A military victory for Negrin? But while waiting it is necessary to fight in the Republican armies, so the state reinforces itself, postponing the ‘moment’ indefinitely.

To illustrate this pure prose we have the Bolshevik-Leninists who launched a manifesto in August 1937 (the power of bluff!), explaining “that for as long as the proletariat is unable to take power, we will defend, in the framework of the capitalist regime in transition, the democratic rights of workers”. The centrists alone are seen as the champions of bourgeois democracy!

Finally, with the last phase of events in Spain, whereas it is very clear that the imperialist war is underway and that it is ruthlessly massacring thousands of proletarians and their families, ‘order’ reigning in Barcelona, as in Burgos, Trotsky was to speak in solemn words. He launched his ‘last warning’.⁵ These were the only lessons he could draw from two years of war on behalf of the Fourth International.

Trotsky promises much and is content with little. He would like to contradict Crux (and with cause!), limiting himself to doing it modestly. Leaving to one side such prattle, where he asserts that the essential duel in Spain was between Bolshevism and Menshevism. Of course the Bolshevik current was expressed “in an accomplished way” by the Trotskyist section. As it did not exist until these last few months (and then only in theory), it will group some elements freshly imported (witness the confession to be found in the “Workers’ Struggle” of Belgium) to Spain, we can imagine the importance of the ‘duel’ between Menshevism and Bolshevism.

Trotsky, as he understands nothing, escapes from this situation by means of historical analogies. Treating us to wanderings in the labyrinth of Thermidor: at one time Thermidor is a perspective, at another we discover that it is behind us and all explaining the Russian situation which had no parallel in the French revolution. In Spain it was necessary to recall the schema of the Russian revolution to understand that we do not know how to explain the events of Spain. The reality is that the so-called Mensheviks, like the so-called Bolsheviks (in their version of ‘perfect’ or ‘imperfect’) have defended the same central position - today the defence of democracy and the defeat of Franco, while ‘tomorrow’ we will examine the problems of the revolution. That is how they become accomplices in the Popular Front - making war and smothering all revolutionary possibilities.

Trotsky shows in his article that when workers submit to bourgeois leadership, in the course of civil war, their defeat is inevitable. But doesn’t Crux say that despite all, the victory of Caballero over Franco was not impossible? And, moreover, the workers have submitted themselves to bourgeois direction! Ah yes! We have to struggle with Caballero without submitting to him, isn’t that so? Trotsky must be living in the clouds, because the capitalist state which took into its hands the Republican army posed the problem thus - it will lead the anti-fascist war according to bourgeois criteria or there will be no war, but it will do so on one direct front not concealed from Franco. We can not ally ourselves in war with bourgeois democracy and separate ourselves from it. Two years have proved that, on this terrain, proletarians have had to progressively abdicate their social aspirations, all in the name of war interests whose representative was the state, and to reestablish the rule of law.

It is only on the level of subterfuge that Trotsky will always find refuge. There has been an alliance in Spain with the ‘shadow of the bourgeoisie’, because the bourgeoisie has passed, in its fat majority, over to Franco. It is though, a very powerful ‘shadow’, because Republican Spain preserved the capitalist state intact and pledged itself to it, in addition to the parties of the Popular Front, the POUM, the anarchists and the Trotskyists themselves. No one dreamed of an assault on power, to destroy the state and to overthrow the bourgeoisie, because one does not fight with a ‘shadow’. Nevertheless, with some speed, the ‘shadow’ took on form and body in the anti-worker repression and has at its disposal socialist and centrist agents acting with remarkable vigour, making each episode of the war an episode of the traditional reestablishment of the rhythm of bourgeois society, hot with the swirl of massacre.

Of course, we find here and there, in this 'last warning', some words which would allow us to suppose that an innovation had taken place, further taking a more serious stand, but they are only words. The problem of the state has not been dealt with. Must the workers struggle within the Republican army whose class content is determined by the class in power? Yes, Trotsky is understood, but it is necessary that the revolutionary masses have "a state apparatus which directly and immediately expresses their will". This apparatus is that of the soviets. Yet in Russia the soviets sprang up and passed to the Bolsheviks on the basis of a perspective of defeatism and the destruction of the bourgeois army. Yet it is a fact that to safeguard the permanent revolution, Trotsky must defend republican democracy against Franco and that excludes defeatism. Evidently, in these conditions the soviets will remain a dream, but at least we will have had the consolation of having posed the idea.

Further, Trotsky envisages some riposte to the civil war that the bourgeoisie set in motion against the proletariat within the Republican zone, but he forgets to tell us how. In fighting as 'the best combatants on the front', just as he explained it to the anarchists who will have found in that the chance to denounce before the masses the positions of the traitors? Yes! How can he push the proletariat into civil war with nothing, nothing to destroy the military fronts? The puzzle left by Trotsky is as dark at the beginning as at the end. Is it necessary to advocate the fraternisation of the exploited on the two fronts, to annihilate the capitalist state, in the first place? It is here that we find the line of demarcation between shameful partisans, enthusiasts of the imperialist war in Spain or China, and internationalists. Trotsky and his Fourth International have chosen. The events of Spain have proven this categorically. We have also chosen, which is why we separate ourselves from them, not on the questions of divergences but on the question of class. These Trotskyist 'lessons' are destined to repeat the experience in other countries, their 'warnings' are clearly deformations destined to confuse the minds of workers who may come across them.

Notes

- 1 See *Bilan 44 Un grand renégat à la queue de paon*.
- 2 The original editorial comments of *Octobre* have been left unchanged.
- 3 Trotsky had to eschew all political activity as a condition of his political asylum in Norway.
- 4 For more on this see the article on fascism in this issue.
- 5 The target of this article is a text by Trotsky entitled *The Lessons of Spain: The Last Warning*, written on December 17th, 1937. It can be found in the collection Leon Trotsky *The Spanish Revolution (1931-9)*, Pathfinder Press NY 1973 pp. 306-26.

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