Revolution, or Self-Managed Capitalism?

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This year is the 50th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War, which began in July 1936 when General Franco led a fascist coup to replace the left-wing republican government.

It was no coincidence that this happened at a time of intense class struggle in Spain. Limited concessions granted by the left-wing of the ruling class — the Popular Front government elected in February 1936 — had not succeeded in in restoring the economic and social stability needed by capitalism. Strikes, demonstrations and political assassinations by the working class continued, as did land seizures and local insurrections in the countryside. The right-wing of the ruling class recognised that strong-arm measures were needed and acted accordingly.

Initially, across one half of Spain the right-wing coup was stalled by armed resistance from peasants and the working class, and only after three years of civil war was the fascist victory secured. **But in one sense the fascist revolt was an immediate success**: the working class and peasants sacrificed the struggle for their own needs and demands and united with liberal and radical supporters of capitalism in a fight to defend one form of capitalist domination — democracy — against another — fascism.

We have already written about this aspect of the Spanish War in in a previous issue of *Wildcat* (number 7). In this article, we want to focus on another important feature: the influence of Anarchist ideas during the events in Spain.

Anarchism and the Spanish 'Revolution'

At the time of the war, a popular idea amongst the Spanish working class and peasants was that each factory, area of land etc., should be owned collectively by its workers, and that these 'collectives' should be linked together on a 'federal basis' — that is, without any 'superior central authority'.

This basic idea had been propagated by Anarchists in Spain for more than 50 years. When the war began, peasants and and working class people in those parts of the country that had not immediately fallen under fascist control seized the opportunity to turn the Anarchist idea into reality.

And ever since then, Anarchists have have regarded the Spanish 'Revolution' as the finest achievement in the history of the revolutionary movement — as the closest capitalism anywhere has come to be being completely overthrown and replaced by a totally different type of society.

Self-Managed Capitalism

The 'revolution' in the countryside has usually been seen as superior to the 'revolution' in the towns and cities. Indeed, in an assessment shared by Wildcat, Anarchist historian and eye-witness of the collectives, Gaston Leval, *describes the industrial collectives as simply another form of capitalism, managed by the workers themselves*:

'Workers in each undertaking took over the factory, the works, or the workshop, the machines, raw materials, and taking advantage of the continuation of the money system and normal capitalist commercial relations, organised production on their own account, selling for their own benefit the produce of their labour.'

We would add that in many cases the workers didn't actually take over production, they simply worked under the direction of their 'own' union bureaucrats with old bosses retained as advisors.

The reactionary consequences of the working class taking sides in the fight between democracy and fascism, instead of pursuing the struggle for their own needs, was particularly evident in the way the industrial collectives operated. For the sake of the 'war effort' workers frequently chose to intensify their own exploitation — usually with the encouragement of their Anarchist leaders.

In 1937, for example, the Anarchist Government Minister in charge of the economy in Catalonia complained that the 'state of tension and over-excitement' caused by the outbreak of civil war had 'reduced to a dangerous degree the capacity and productivity of labour, increasing the costs of production so much that if this is not corrected rapidly and energetically, we will be facing a dead-end street. For these reasons we must readjust the length of the working day.'

However, although some Anarchists are prepared to criticise the 'Government Anarchists' and the industrial collectives, all Anarchists are unanimous that the rural collectives succeeded in achieving 'genuine socialisation', or as it was termed, 'libertarian communism'.

Organising the Rural Collectives

What typically happened in the peasant collectives was this. Once the fascist rebellion had been quelled locally, the inhabitants of the village got together in a big meeting. Anarchist militants took the initiative in proposing what to do. Everyone was invited to to pool their land, livestock, and tools in the collective: 'The concept "yours and mine" will no longer exist … everything will belong to everyone.' Property belonging to fascist landlords and the Church was expropriated for the collective's use. A committee was elected to supervise the running of the collective. Work was parcelled out among groups of 10 or 15 people, and co-ordinated by meetings of delegates nominated by each group.

Free Access

A few collectives did distribute their produce on the communist basis of free access — 'to each according to their needs'. A resident of Magdalena de Pulpis explained the system in his village:

'Everyone works and everyone has the right to what he needs free of charge. He simply goes to the store where provisions and all other necessities are supplied. Everything is is distributed freely with only a notation of what he took.'

For the first time in their lives people could help themselves to whatever they needed. And that's exactly what they did. Free access was not abused by 'greed' or 'gluttony'. Another witness, Augustin Souchy, described the situation in Muniesa:

> 'The bakery was open. Anyone can come for any bread he wants.'
>
> "Are there not abuses of this?"
>
> "No", answers the old man who gives out the bread. "Everyone takes as much as they actually need."

Wine is also distributed freely, not rationed.

"Doesn't anyone get drunk?"

"So far there has not been a single case of drunkenness", he answers.'

This of course was also partly a reflection of an Anarchist puritanism which in other places led them to ban tobacco and even coffee.

The Wages System

However, distribution of goods on a communist basis (i.e. free access) was *not* the norm. In the vast majority of collectives the level of consumption was not based on people's freely chosen needs and desires, but just as it is under capitalism, by the amount of money people had in their pockets. Only goods in abundant supply could be taken freely. Everything else had to be bought from wages paid by the collective to its members.

Family Values

The 'family wage', which oppresses women by making them economically dependent on the male head of the household, was adopted by almost all of the collectives. Each male collectivist received so much in wages per day for himself, plus a smaller amount for his wife and each child. For women in fact, the Spanish 'Revolution' could hardly have been less revolutionary.

It did not challenge the family as an economic unit of society, nor the sexual division of labour between men and women. 'It is eleven o'clock in the morning. The gong sounds. Mass? It is to remind the women to prepare the midday meal.' Women also remained regarded as inferior social beings, frowned on, for example, if they joined the men in the local cafe for a drink after work.

The Proliferation of Money

The equal family wage was generally not paid in the national currency, which most collectives discarded for internal use. In its place the collectives substituted other means of exchange, issuing their own local currency in the form of vouchers, coupons, rationing booklets, certificates, etc. Far from being abolished as it would be during a communist revolution, during the Spanish 'Revolution' money proliferated as never before!

But the creation of literally hundreds of different currencies soon caused problems. Few collectives were self-sufficient, but trade among the collectives was hampered by the lack of a universally acceptable currency. In 1937 the Aragon Federation of Peasant Collectives had to reintroduce a standard currency in the form of a standard rationing booklet for all the Aragon collectives. It also established its own bank — run by the Bank Workers Union of course!

The Exchange of Goods

Not all transactions between collectives were affected by money. Central warehouses were set up where collectives exchanged their surplus product among themselves for the goods they

lacked. Under this system 'hard cash' was was frequently absent. However, the relative proportions in which goods were bartered was still determined by monetary values. For example how many sacks of flour a collective could could obtain in exchange for a ton of potatoes was worked out by determining the value of both in money terms. Just as under capitalism, prices were 'based on the cost of raw materials, the work involved, general expenses and the resources of the collectivists'.

This was not a communist system of production for use and distribution according to need, but a capitalist system of rival enterprises trading their products according to their exchange value. No matter how desperately they needed them, collectives could not obtain the goods they required until they had produced enough to exchange for them, since they were not allowed to withdraw a sum of goods more than those they had deposited. This frequently led to great hardship among the less wealthy collectives.

Market Competition

As well as trading among themselves, collectives also had to find markets for their goods in competition with non-collectivised enterprises. A common consequence of this system has always been that goods which cannot be sold profitably end up being stockpiled or or destroyed, while elsewhere people have to do without without these goods because they don't have the means to buy them. The consequences of the Spanish collectives' capitalist mode of operation conformed to this pattern; for example:

'The warehouse owned by by the SICEP (Syndicate of the Footwear Industry in Elda and Petrel) in Elda, Valencia, and Barcelona, as well as the factory warehouses, were full of unsold goods, valued at some 10 million pesestas.'

The End of the Collectives

The Spanish collectives were eventually destroyed by in-fighting among the anti-fascists and by the fascist victory itself. One can only speculate about how they might have developed had they survived the war. Our guess is that their basically capitalist nature would have become even more obvious.

In the capitalist economy market competition forces every enterprise to try to produce its goods as cheaply as possible as to undercut its rivals. The Spanish collectives, trading with each other and competing with non-collectivised enterprises would inevitably have been subject to the same pressures.

One of the ways in which capitalist enterprise try to cut costs is by increasing the exploitation of the workforce, for example by cutting wages or increasing the intensity of the work, or lengthening working hours. Where this happens in an enterprise owned and run by an individual boss or the state, workers can identify their enemy and fight against their exploitation. This is far less likely to happen where the entire workforce itself is the collective owner of and manager of the enterprise — as was the case with the Spanish collectives. The workforce has a vested interest in the profitability of the capital which it collectively owns; it identifies with and willingly organises its own exploitation. It has to in fact to keep itself in business.

The End of Anarchism

Many present-day Anarchists — such as the Direct Action Movement, *Black Flag*, and *Freedom* — still stand for the type of self-managed capitalism established by the industrial and agricultural collectives during the Spanish civil war. Because of this we oppose them as resolutely as we oppose the supporters of any other capitalist ideology — and we urge any of our sympathisers who think of themselves as anarchists to follow suit.

From the point of view of working class people's needs, self-managed capitalism is a dead-end, just as reactionary as private or state-capitalism. The communist society we are fighting for can only be established by the complete destruction of ALL property, money, wages and markets, whatever their form.

The information and quotes in this article come from *The Anarchist Collectives* by Sam Dolgoff, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* by Gaston Leval, *The Spanish Revolution* by Stanley Payne, and *With the Peasants of Aragon* by Augustin Souchy.

At the time of the Spanish civil war the revolutionaries who published the journals *Bilan* and *International Council Correspondence* criticised anti-fascism and Anarchism from a similar point of view to that held by *Wildcat* today. If you're interested in reading some of the articles they wrote, we can send copies for the price of a £1 donation to cover the cost of photocopying and postage.

> 'We ask the Catalan people to make and end to factional struggles and intrigues … and think of nothing but the war'
>
> 'Let no one think about increasing wages and reducing hours of work'
>
> 'Our militia will never defend the bourgeoise, they just do not attack it.'
>
> ANARCHIST LEADER DURRUTI CALLS OFF THE CLASS WAR

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