
La Coordinadora: A Union without Bureaucrats

“La Coordinadora” is the Spanish longshoremen’s union whose unique combination of hiring hall job rotation, industrial unionism, and Spanish anarcho-syndicalist assemblyism results in one of the most democratic labor organizations anywhere in the world. The forces of “containerization” and conflict with Socialist and Communist dominated labor federations have filled Coordinadora’s brief history with one national port shut-down after another.

I heard of Coordinadora from Stan Weir, a former West Coast longshoreman who wrote about Coordinadora after a 1982 visit. When I started probing him for details, Weir urged me to talk directly with the longshoremen he had met. Taking up his suggestion, I happened to arrive in Barcelona two days before a strike that halted shipping throughout Spain. The government was attempting to rush through port reorganization without union input. If it was unresponsive to the December 28, 1987 strike, Coordinadora threatened a week long strike to be followed by a one-hour-work-the-next-hour-don’t-work strike indefinitely.

The last Sunday in 1987, I met Juan Madrid, who is a Coordinadora *delegado* or delegate, something like a shop steward in American unions. After Madrid finished unloading Nissans, he spent the rest of the day showing me the government-run hiring hall, the Barcelona harbor, and the dockers union headquarters.

Though few Americans are aware of it, some of the most extensive job control that workers have ever attained was among US West Coast longshoremen and merchant seamen, who won full union control of hiring in the 1930s and kept it until 1960. Despite having to work through government-run halls, Spanish dockers have approached these gains in their control over hiring. Both in Barcelona and Valencia (which I visited a week later), dockers pointed with great pride to the rows and columns of tags which each bear one longshoreman’s number. Those at the top of the list receive the first jobs that come in. Job dispatchers of the Office for Port Labor (OTP), a division of the Spanish Labor Ministry, then move the tags of those who are hired to the bottom of the list.

This system of job rotation lies at the core of strikes which have shaken Spanish harbors. Dockers repeatedly emphasize that there is no favoritism in their work assignments. With work evenly distributed,

there is no group of unemployed longshoremen who might step in when others are on strike. Their hiring halls include every docker—rank and file longshoremen, *delegados*, local president, and national officers.

Well aware that most unions offer election to office as the best way to escape from the workplace, Spanish longshoremen take pride in the everyday practice of their egalitarian ideology. But there’s another part of job rotation which is pure pragmatism. Enamored with Coordinadora’s strength, the two larger union federations have both tried to woo it. Dockers have generally scorned them, largely because they know that being absorbed into an established labor federation would mean being assigned professional negotiators at contract time. They insist that the only people who can negotiate for dockers are those who work on the docks.

It’s easy to understand this hard line when driving through the ports with men who operate loading/unloading equipment. At one time, longshoring provided jobs for 20,000 men. They worked in tight-knit groups, making sure that cargo was hauled in and stacked properly. But the days of lifting bundles, rolling barrels, and wheeling crates on dollies are two decades past. By the early 1970s, Spain experienced the world-wide effects of “containerization.” Cargo is now packed into 40’ x 8’ x 8’ containers (the smaller sizes are 20’ long). Straddle carriers, giant forklifts and cranes load containers into ships and unload them directly onto trucks and trains.

Shippers laud this transformation as a technological wonder. It has allowed them to dramatically increase the quantity of cargo moved while cutting the number of the world’s longshore jobs in half. Spain has lost 10,000 longshoremen by retiring workers not being replaced. With virtually no new jobs created, containerization has effectively destroyed the tradition of sons learning longshoring from their fathers.

The other reason that dockers are unlikely to share the shippers’ ecstasy over this mechanization marvel is its effect on worklife. Crane operators now sit isolated, 20 to 50 above deck level. Partners fasten containers from each side, only able to see each other briefly when they get to the end of the container. This new type of work has reduced the number of accidents while increasing their severity. Several times a year, Coordinadora’s paper, *la Estiba*, reports a docker whose leg was crushed or who was killed by a falling container.

A few blocks away from the waterfront building which houses the government-run hiring hall is Barcelona Coordinadora’s union building. Maritime history runs through its walls. Owned by the anarchist union before the Spanish Civil War, it was seized by Franco in 1939. When the 1976 post-Franco government was turning over large quantities of confiscated property to Spain’s mushrooming unions, dockers asked for it back. Not comfortable dealing with such a headstrong workforce, the government waffled. Barcelona dockers then physically occupied the building. This is somewhat reminiscent of US sit-down strikes of the 30s, lunch-counter civil rights sit-ins, and student anti-war occupations

of administration buildings. The difference is that the Barcelona longshoremen never left, only compromising to pay the government rent.

On Monday, December 28, the General Assembly of all Barcelona dockers gathered at the hiring hall to approve the National Coordinating Committee's recommendation. Then, I was invited to join about 25 longshoremen for the *delegados*' meeting in the union building which planned the strike details for Barcelona. They briefly put aside linking up with the national port strike to pump me for information about the American labor movement. "Why do workers in the U.S. vote for the capitalist parties?" "Why wasn't there a general strike when Reagan attacked PATCO?" "Do American workers support the union leaders?" "If they don't, why don't they vote them out?" "Why are only 17% of Americans in unions?"

This was one of the few times dockers invited theoretical questions during my two week visit. My interest in how Coordinadora structured itself to guard against bureaucratization always seemed to get sidetracked into the longshoremen's favorite topic of conversation—their ability to bring a total halt to Spanish shipping.

The 1980s opened with a general port shut-down over the government system of *comites de empresa* (often translated "works committees"). They consist of *delegados* who are elected by a complex proportion which has the worker/delegado ratio increase as the number of employees increases. The larger unions worked out a deal whereby the government would reimburse each elected delegate for 40 hours of work per month to free him to do union tasks. Spanish port strikes erupted when the government repeatedly ignored Coordinadora's request that its *delegados* be reimbursed likewise. The 1980 struggle was costly. During mass picketing in Las Palmas (the large port in the Spanish Canary Islands off the coast of North Africa) a non-union truck driver ran over and killed a striker's seventeen year-old daughter. The government gave in; but, her picture still reminds everyone entering the Barcelona union office of the price Coordinadora paid for equal treatment.

In 1982, the social democratic PSOE (Socialist Workers Party of Spain) assumed power, leading many dockers to wonder if the attacks on their union would abate. They did not. PSOE's Felipe Gonzalez had to deal with the employer claim that strong hiring halls and repeated port turmoil made Spanish docks inefficient by standards of the world market. Within a few years of becoming Prime Minister, Felipe demonstrated that a social democratic government could pursue "privatization" with a vigor that would make Margaret Thatcher blush green with envy.

The years immediately preceding PSOE's "reorganization" plan saw a series of strikes that were most typical of Spain's port conflicts. In 1983, the Sea-Land Company began to use non-registered dockers to unload fish in the southern port of Algeciras. The local media hyped that the strike was being manipulated by Barcelona dockers at the expense of Algeciras jobs. In the middle of this campaign, the UGT

(General Union of Workers, affiliate of PSOE) persuaded several dockers to march in a back-to-work parade carrying banners reading "Algeciras, Si; Barcelona, No!"

Several nation-wide port shut-downs convinced Algeciras longshoremen that they were not being sacrificed to the Catalonians, and Sea-Land finally signed a 1985 agreement to use only hiring hall dockers. That this beef spread across three years shows that longshoremen did not achieve perfect unity. The possibility of some dockers grabbing at the lure of permanent employment with one shipper is an omnipresent threat to the port workers. The frequency of Spain's port strikes comes largely from the shippers' urge to test whether docker unity can be broken.

The conflict was raised to a new intensity in early 1986. Employers were able to push through a law that the OTP would be replaced with 27 regional *consejos estatales* (state councils). The divide-and-conquer strategy would force separate agreements in each port, thereby allowing shippers to increase their business where the union proved weakest. Even more important, the law could reduce the hiring halls to providing only one of four types of docker. A more privileged category would be steady employees of the major shipping companies. Companies would also be free to hire "occasional workers" during periods of intense port activity. A fourth category would be part-time workers in a sort of state-run training program (Employers are pushing similar programs in ports throughout the world, including U.S. ports). The shippers dreamed of a *laissez faire* labor world where groups of longshoremen would compete among themselves within each port while ports would compete with each other. But, ambiguity in the statutes seemed to invite a whole new round of strikes to specify how they would be implemented.

No one had to wait long. The government initiated a massive publicity drive to win public support for port "modernization." Angered that Spanish media would not present their side, Barcelona dockers drove a caravan of loading equipment out of the harbor. As the police ordered them to turn around, they responded that, if they were not allowed to pass, they would drive the machinery into the water. The police backed down; the dockers tied up Barcelona traffic for two hours; and Spanish media presented Coordinadora's interpretation of the law.

Despite this tremendous morale boost, the law was a profound victory for the employers. Later that year, the huge shipping company, Contenemar, decided that it was time to flex employer muscle in a big way. It initiated an unabashed drive to sign up Barcelona dockers without going through the hiring hall. Particularly bitter strikes shut down Spanish ports. Fascist groups provided several dozen strikebreakers. Union demonstrators broke through police lines, dragged the scabs off of forklifts, and threw them in the water. But, the fascists were back under heavier police guard the following day and it was only the ability to close down ports across the country that

pressured Contenemar into signing a 1987 agreement to phase out non-registered dockers.

Simmering beneath this turmoil is a deep distrust between politically-influenced unions. The tendencies that mushroomed after Franco's 1975 death seemed to pick up where things had left off in 1939. Though the Union General de Trababajores (UGT) has close ties with PSOE, it has increasingly shown a willingness to criticize the social democratic party. Similarly, the "workers' commissions" (*comisiones obreras*, or, CC.OO.) has some degree of independence from the Spanish Communist Party (PCE). The much smaller anarchist union, Confederacion Nacional de Trabajo (CNT), has split into two factions, each claiming to be the true descendant of Civil War days.

When the first post-Franco government announced toleration of all parties except the PCE, longshoremen joined the 1976 strike to force its legalization. Shippers fired seven longshoremen as the government was giving in. The dockers then asked the PCE to organize a strike to help get their jobs back and were told that the time was not right. Dockers then formed their own union, *La Coordinadora Estatal de los Estibadores Portuarios*, or, "la Coordinadora," as it has come to be known.

Coordinadora immediately outdistanced the UGT and CC.OO., each of which sought to organize Spanish ports. It won over 99% support in the two largest ports of Las Palmas and Barcelona. Of the three medium-sized ports, Coordinadora has 80% support in Bilbao and over 99% support in Valencia and Cadiz. The UGT and CC.OO. each predominate in one of the 17 or 18 smaller ports, with Coordinadora averaging over 90% support in the others.

Coordinadora is currently Spain's only industrial union. While the UGT and CC.OO. frequently win a majority in individual workplaces, they have never been able to match its 80% support throughout a major industrial sector. The longshore union has further consolidated itself by avoiding overt identification with either branch of anarchists. It urges all dockers to join, regardless of their political affiliation.

The American observer cannot help but notice a wage egalitarianism which is foreign to unions in this country, where contract talk addresses "fair differentials." That local *delegados* and national officers make the same as other longshoremen is a given. They work the docks just as any other union member and devote their time to union office, except for the zone and national meetings when the union compensates them for time lost at their regular pay rate. This 8,000-member union gets by with a total of two paid employees, who are not officers and have no power other than what answering letters brings. Coordinadora carefully sets their salary at the same level that dockers make.

The same ideology of egalitarianism runs through its meeting structure, which shows remnants of the anarchism practiced during the Spanish Civil War. In perhaps the only historic instance of peasants' instituting land collectivization rather than resisting it, rural Aragonese

tossed out the local gentry and shared the farming of large estates. Unlike Russia of 20 years earlier, Catalonian workers did not look to the state to organize industry, but seized and ran it themselves. Rural anarcho-communists and urban anarcho-syndicalists both developed *assemblyism*—the idea that general assemblies make important decisions and elected *delegados* have no power other than carrying out those mandates.

Learning that any docker can attend *delegado* meetings is apt to arouse mixed emotions. On one hand, the openness is a welcome relief to the "business union" practices of closing the doors to all but the leadership. Yet, it may seem that there is little point in electing *delegados* if anyone who shows up can vote. Rather than reflecting "looseness," this structure of *delegado* meetings verifies that ultimate power rests with the General Assembly.

Accepting election as a *delegado* means volunteering to do a great deal of work for the union—showing up at a *delegado* meeting is a way of volunteering to do the work of helping to hammer out the details of implementing decisions of the General Assembly. It is a sign of maturity for a *delegado* to be able to put personal feelings aside and vote in a way that best carries out the mood of the General Assembly. "Packing" a *delegado* meeting with those who would vote a certain way would be seen as infantile. It would also be an exercise in futility since the next General Assembly meeting would simply reverse any decision made.

Even though there is tremendous social pressure, occasionally a longshoreman will not give in. This happened early in Coordinadora's history, when it decided to have frequent zone and national meetings which would be funded from the money the government reimburses *delegados* for union work. Longshoremen voted that *delegados* would donate government money to the union, thereby requiring them to do their delegate work on top of a full month's longshore work. Two elected *delegados* refused to go along with their General Assemblies' majority vote and thereby revived another tradition of Spanish anarchism—immediate recall of anyone in an elected position.

On New Year's Eve day, I had the chance to discuss the intricacies of Coordinadora's finances with Julian Garcia, the current National Coordinator. Though this position is more or less analogous to a union president, Garcia does not show any of the effusive handshaking characteristic of chronic office-holders. With a soft-spoken tone complementing his intensesness, Garcia explained why the union felt so strongly about *delegados'* donating their government reimbursement.

Garcia drew a diagram of Spain's 23 ports, each of which employs from six to over 1000 longshoremen. Coordinadora divides itself into five regions or zones: Catalonia, Valencia, Cadiz, Bilbao and the Canary Islands. Each zone has meetings between two or more representatives from each port. Meetings can be as infrequent as monthly, or can be several times a week during negotiations or strikes. The National Coordinating Committee consists of the National Coordinator and one

representative chosen by each zonal meeting. It is responsible for overall communication and nation-wide negotiations with the shippers and government.

These meetings are expensive because of their frequency. The majority of Coordinadora's budget goes to paying for food, lodging and time lost at work for representatives to attend these meetings. The systematic attempts to broaden the number of dockers who attend these wider meetings provides an opportunity for many to become acquainted with the concerns of those in other ports.

This sharing of thoughts is vital to Coordinadora's survival because each local is totally autonomous. They have no concept of a national body putting a local into "receivership," or grabbing its bank account and appointing its officers as is done in the US. The national union cannot force locals to go out on strike. The only way a national port strike can occur is for each autonomous union to recognize that a threat to another port is a threat to itself. Democracy in the sense of gaining 50% + 1 votes cannot apply to port strikes. Every major port must be shut down for the strike to win. Zonal meetings are not so much for dockers to have a formal vote as a time to figure out if the feeling of militancy is simultaneously high in every port.

Aware of the dangers of interport rivalry, Coordinadora's zonal meetings are a communication system which uses strong feelings between longshoremen as a basis for solidarity between ports. There is an interesting parallel in the way the union selects its National Coordinator. There is such a dislike of power politics that they use a two part process: first, a national vote decides the port he will come from; and, second, dockers from that port elect him. In this way, longshoremen prevent the "electioneering" that accompanies nation-wide elections—the officer is chosen only by people who have worked with him on the docks.

Like many other dockers, Julian Garcia had thought about Coordinadora's joining one of the small anarchist CNTs. The split which created two CNTs occurred over the government-sponsored *comites de empresa* (works committees). The more radical CNT, accused of "purism" by its opponents, argues that any involvement with the *comites* coopts people into an elitist system that negotiates contracts behind the backs of union members. They charge that this is a betrayal of the anarchist principle that only General Assemblies of all workers can speak for the employees of any enterprise. The other CNT, accused of "reformism," has won election to several *comites* across Spain. It claims that having an anarchist or two on the *comite* allows them to tell the Assembly what the employers and union big shots are cooking up.

The practical difficulty for both CNTs is that Assemblies tend not to function except during strikes. To my knowledge, Coordinadora is the only Spanish union which turns out thousands of workers across the country to attend General Assemblies week after week. Assemblyist democracy thus has a meaning for the practice of longshore unionism

while it only exists in theory (or during brief times) for the *bona fide* anarchist unions.

Sitting around in Spanish bars can provide a glimpse of an organization that may be too intimate for its participants to recognize. There seems to be a subtle difference between the feelings of union officers and other members about Coordinadora. Quite aware that they are part of a movement that is undeniably unique, both eventually get around to asking, "What do you think about our union?" The average member who has never held office seemed to be waiting to hear "*muy fuerte*," confirming that his union is "very strong." For a rank and file docker who probably had a relative tortured or murdered by the Franco regime, the chance to describe the ecstasy of throwing a rightist scab into the water is enough to make his day. It's not necessary to understand Catalanian or Valenciano dialects to see the gleam in an eye that unquestionably translates, "We got to kick fascist ass that day."

Delegados and national officers who have been repeatedly exposed to negotiations are quicker to look beyond local physical skirmishes. The latest conflict found the government backing down and agreeing to involve Coordinadora in planning any port changes. But, the powerful array of shippers, government, and Socialist and Communist union federations lined up on the other side make them worry openly about Coordinadora's future.

One of its greatest current dangers is isolation. None of the European dockers' unions associated with social democratic or Communist federations are interested in permanent alliances. In the U.S., scarcely a dozen articles about it have appeared in small left papers. Top leaders of the I.L.W.U. (International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union) and I.L.A. (International Longshoremen's Association) have not made contact with Coordinadora or informed their members of any of its struggles, even though American longshoremen are now threatened by the "steadyman" category (permanent, non-hiring hall dockers).

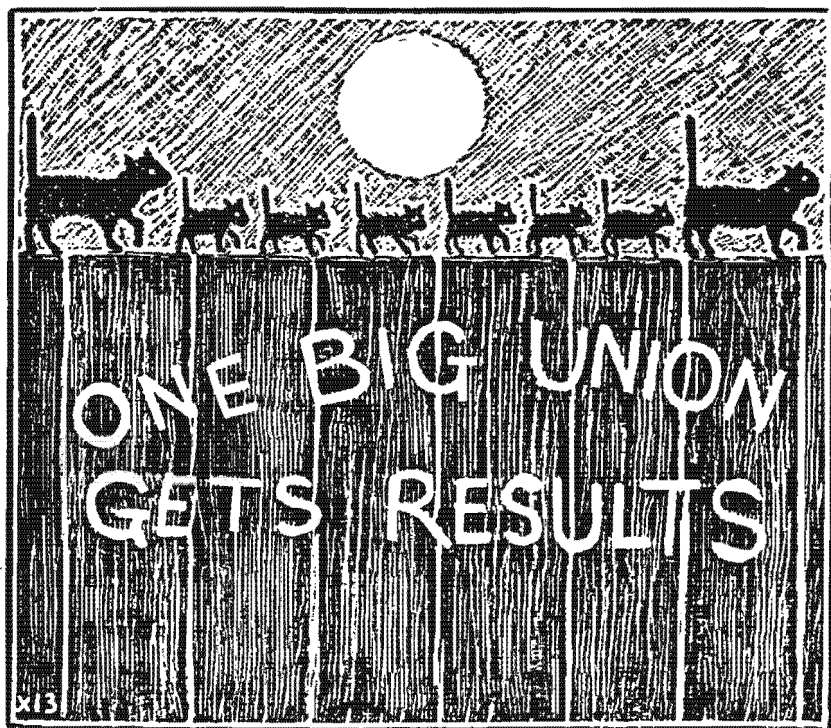
Perhaps the most amazing fact about Coordinadora is that it exists. Withstanding all of the forces aligned against it, including decimation by automation and twelve years of strike turmoil, the union shows no sign of losing the faith of 80% of Spain's longshoremen. Their shared ideology of egalitarianism plays no small role in the ranks' standing so tightly with the organizers. No one in Coordinadora denies that people who are frequently elected to office have more input than those who have never run. What is refreshing is an embarrassment about informal hierarchies which stands in such stark contrast to the typical "business union" officer who accepts union power elites as an unalterable fact of life.

American unions desperately need a turnaround in their continuing plunge in membership. If they are going to capture the inspiration of vast numbers of service workers and proletarianized professionals, unions must be more than a grey blob of nonimagination. One must wonder if it is utterly impossible for a union movement to dynamically

preach the values of racial equality, anti-militarism, sexual liberation, ecological sanity, and, most important, an absence of domineering relationships in working towards these goals. In the absence of any currently viable model of non-authoritarianism in the American labor movement, developments on Spanish docks could well be worth some close scrutiny.

Of course, the future could well see these longshoremen as Don Quixotes of the 1980's, chasing after antiquated notions of membership control, woefully unable to accommodate to the world of the Universal Bureaucrat. But strange things happen. It's also possible that one day people will look back at Coordinadora as a pioneer of born-again unionism that rediscovered day-to-day social equality.

Don Fitz



Cartoon by C. E. Setzer (X13)

Spontaneity, Organizing and Worker Education

When Karl Marx wrote, in rather more abstract words, that the proof of the recipe is in the eating, he was right of course, but overlooked a fundamental ambiguity.¹ At what historical point does practice “prove the truth, that is the reality and power” (not to mention “the this-sidedness”!) of a theory or argument? The omission is striking in that Marx well knew that historical outcomes are only provisional and already contain the beginnings of being transcended.

Debates that to a majority of revolutionaries once seemed resolved by the Bolshevik victory in Russia or the rise of the CIO, now are open again. They have taken on new life in changed circumstances. One such set of issues is that which concerns left labor practice. The vastly increased mobility of multinational capital (partly also at the root of the changes in the Soviet Union, East Europe and China) has prompted not only anti-union campaigns by corporations and the government, but a new rank and file upsurge and a rethinking by labor radicals.

We have only to list the labor practice that has been typical of the U.S. left in the last fifty years to see its present—if not earlier—inadequacy: the militancy on immediate issues, but failure to raise questions of who should control work and how the society should be structured; the drive to become union officers and lead the members honestly, but lack of sustained challenge to the fact of hierarchy and bureaucracy within the union; the politics of taking progressive stands on national and international issues in the name of workers who were led, rather than involving members in the discussions and in the making of policy. Perhaps we should add to this list of questionable practices the reluctance to develop worker organizations other than existing unions. There are increasing signs that the rank and file revolt, previously directed more to replacing particularly bad union officials, is challenging the very structure of unions and the principles on which they operate.

For labor radicals searching for effective workplace-oriented political practice, this rethinking fits into a long history of debates on spontaneity and organizing. There is a rich tradition exploring the level of awareness and struggle that is generated from people's direct experience and asking what, if anything, needs to be brought from outside that direct experience (usually by the radical intellectuals engaging in the debate). Most of the tradition revolves around the workplace, recognizing it as key both in shaping people's political response and in molding other institutions in society. The tradition is strong in analyzing the relevant factors in work experience. These include, for example, the process of working cooperatively with others, the fact of being exploited, and participation in resisting exploitation.

The traditional debate has been less strong in its understanding of the underlying theoretical question: how consciousness and action

¹ *Theses on Feuerbach*, second thesis.