

Part Two: The Civil War in Spain

Introduction

IN THE May 1936 issue of the APCF paper, *Advance*, R. Bunton wrote that 'Today, an atmosphere of despair envelops the working class'. There were good reasons for making this observation. The working class in Britain was weakened and demoralised after the 'Great Depression'. At its peak in January 1933, unemployment had reached nearly 3 million, or over 20 per cent of all insured workers. The numbers employed in the core industries of the 'traditional' (blue-collar, manual) working class – mining, engineering, shipbuilding – had been declining steadily, and, simultaneously, been subject to higher than average rates of unemployment. In the geographical areas where these industries were concentrated, this had a devastating effect. Meanwhile, with Nazism's rise to power in Germany, and the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (1935/36), the outbreak of a Second World War was increasingly being discussed in terms of probability rather than possibility.

Only when seen against this depressing background can the APCF's response to the war in Spain be understood. When a Popular Front government took power in Spain in February 1936 – even though it had been elected on what the APCF admitted was a 'liberalistic and reformist' programme – the APCF stated that 'The recent events in Spain have given the international proletariat the first welcome news for some time' (*Advance*, May 1936). In similar vein, when large numbers of Spanish workers resisted the fascist generals' attempted coup against the government on 19 July 1936, Guy Aldred of the United Socialist Movement wrote: 'The Spanish struggle . . . is the mighty proletarian movement that Europe needed' (*Regeneracion*, 2 August 1936).

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the Spanish civil war was almost as much of an inspiration to the anti-parliamentarians in Britain as the Russian revolution had been 20 years before. The 'atmosphere of despair' which R. Bunton had spoken of appeared to have been dispelled; the anti-parliamentarians flung themselves enthusiastically into support for 'the Spanish struggle': 'I was never so active in speaking at street corners as in 1936 to 1939 during the Spanish crisis' noted Willie McDougall of the APCF, while John Caldwell, a survivor of the USM, has also recalled that public meetings then 'drew bigger crowds than at any time since the general strike'.

Since its origins, within the APCF there had been some members who considered themselves primarily as

marxist communists, and others who regarded themselves first and foremost as anarchists. The relatively sizeable support for anarchism among the Spanish workers, and the strong anarchist admixture in many of the events surrounding the civil war, had the effect of rejuvenating many British anarchists, and the APCF was one of the organisations in which these anarchist elements came to the fore. In fact, it is said that such was the domination the anarchists established within the APCF at this time that the marxist members were at one stage banned from speaking for the group on its public platform. The result of this was that as far as the APCF was concerned, the sudden burst of activity sparked off by the events in Spain made a negligible contribution to the cause of communism.

On the positive side, the APCF interpreted the attempted fascist coup as a confirmation of their view on the futility of parliamentary action; as one of the APCF's members, A. S. Knox warned 'wherever the ruling class decides that parliament fails to administer to their express desires, parliament will be abolished!' (*Workers' Free Press*, Sept 1937). The same lesson is also drawn in Section I on 'Parliamentarism' in the APCF's 'Principles And Tactics', and M.G.'s article on 'The People's Convention', both of which are included in the first section of this pamphlet.

When it came to a practical response, however, the APCF did not take to heart this lesson which it itself had drawn, that 'Constitutionalism and Parliamentarism has surely now proved a failure' (*Advance*, Sept 1936). The APCF's appeals largely remained confined to the terrain of bourgeois legalism: they spoke of the fascists' 'breaches of international law' in trying to overthrow 'an orthodox democratic government' (*Advance*, Aug–Sept 1936), and criticised the British government for refusing to supply arms to the Republicans even though 'The Spanish Government satisfies the legal requirements according to orthodox international legal standards' (*Fighting Call*, 1 Feb 1937). They urged protest strikes and demonstrations, not to help the Spanish workers *directly*, but to pressurise the government into lifting its arms embargo and changing its neutralist policy of 'non-intervention'.

Another feature of the APCF's response to the events in Spain was its completely uncritical support for the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists of the CNT-FAI. From October 1936 to February 1937 the APCF co-operated with the anarchists of the Freedom group in London to

publish four issues of the *Fighting Call*, the contents of which were compiled almost entirely from issues of the CNT-FAI's *Boletín de Información*, with no critical comment or analysis added. Along the same lines, in February 1937 the APCF published the text of a speech made by the anarchist Minister of Public Health, Frederica Montseny, as a pamphlet titled *Militant Anarchism and the Reality in Spain*, in which statements such as the following were allowed to pass without comment or criticism: 'in these tragic times, we must put aside our point of view, our ideological conditions, in order to realise the unity of all anti-fascists from the Republicans to the Anarchists'.

In short, the APCF at this stage seemed capable neither of seeing beyond the false, diversionary issue of democracy versus fascism, nor of posing the real issue of communism versus capitalism, *in all its forms*.

By calling on the British state to drop its policy of 'non-intervention' and take sides in a war between fascist and democratic factions of the same *capitalist* class, the APCF had in fact taken up an objectively anti-working class position, and it was this which enabled it to publish, *without comment or criticism*, the statements of bourgeois politicians such as Montseny. When an analysis which was opposed to capitalism in all its forms, fascist or democratic, did appear in the APCF's press, it came not from any member of the APCF but from Ethel MacDonald of the USM, who wrote that 'Fascism is not something new, some new force of evil opposed to society, but is only the old enemy, Capitalism, under a new and fearful sounding name . . . Anti-Fascism is the new slogan by which the working class is being betrayed' (*Workers' Free Press*, Oct 1937).

Interestingly, Ethel MacDonald had actually gone to Spain in October 1936 to work for the propaganda section of the CNT-FAI. She was accompanied by Jane Patrick, whose involvement in the revolutionary movement dated back to the time of the original Glasgow Anarchist Group. When Patrick went to Spain she was disowned by the APCF and she joined the USM soon after returning to Britain. The reports which Patrick and

MacDonald sent back from Spain were published in the single-issue papers *News From Spain* (a USM publication) and *Barcelona Bulletin* (a joint APCF-USM effort), both of which came out in May 1937. Patrick fiercely attacked the counter-revolutionary actions of the Stalinist PSUC, but also criticised the reformist orientation of the CNT-FAI leadership and its naive attachment to anti-fascist unity, stressed the importance of working class self-activity, and rejected the idea that 'democratic capitalism' was preferable to 'fascist' capitalism. Patrick's ideas, like Ethel MacDonald's, but unlike the APCF's, thus expressed revolutionary opposition to a capitalist war. Very few other groups took up a similar stance at the time, notable exceptions being the *International Council Correspondence* group in the United States and the *Bilan* group in France.

The two articles on Spain from *Solidarity* which follow show some signs of an approach which was more critical than that adopted by the APCF itself. 'An Armistice?' at least characterises the Popular Front as a 'capitalist government'; in the same issue in which this appeared, the APCF criticised the British ruling class's 'damnable treachery to Loyalist Spain' – Loyalists being supporters of . . . the capitalist government! The second article, by the Spanish anarchist group The Friends of Durruti, titled 'The Friends of Durruti Accuse', represents a great advance on the APCF's position, with its criticisms of the CNT-FAI and of the dissociation of the war from the revolution, and its statement that 'Democracy defeated the Spanish people, not Fascism'.

Before the war in Spain ended, the anarchists in the APCF broke away from the group, forming the Glasgow Anarchist-Communist Federation in 1937. The precise reasons for this split are obscure. At the beginning of the Second World War the Glasgow group of the Anarchist Federation Of Britain was formed on the basis of an alliance between the Anarchist-Communist Federation and the Glasgow Marxian Study Group. One of those prominent in the Marxian Study Group was Jimmy Kennedy, two of whose articles, originally published in *Solidarity*, appear elsewhere in this pamphlet.

An Armistice

Barcelona, 25 June – Rumours are circulating on the eventuality of a crisis in the government. To our view, if a new government was to be created, it would be one led by Martinez Barrio or Portela Valladares, professed friends of Franco. The Popular Front Government are doing their utmost to effect an armistice, to effect a reconciliation with Franco, and the main object of their policy has been to try and hand government power into the hands of Franco supporters.

If this government came to be, it would mean a return to the state of affairs prevailing before the 19 July 1936. Even then when Franco made his bloody attack, the government refused to give the workers arms, and even appealed to Franco to stop (not to stop killing the workers) but to prevent the revolution from developing. In the first days of the revolution the government feared more the mighty power of the workers than that of Franco, and the same is true today, even more so.

Thus, today, the murderers of the Asturian miners, the bloody persecutors of the workers' organisations, are to be given the power of the 'Popular Front Government' of Spain. This will involve mass sabotage, mass executions, mass murder of those who fight against Franco. These men will send to their death the flower of the Red Armies of Spain.

As for the CP reformists, when their work of handing back the power to the Spanish capitalist class is complete, they will be dispensed with, for the Government will then be capable of defending itself against the working class, and perhaps Franco will return to the fold as supreme commander of the republican forces against the workers, their common enemy.

All this could have been avoided (two million dead) if the workers had taken control and eliminated the government, thus killing at one stroke a great force that has been working with Franco all along the line. The proletariat of Spain was lulled into political unconsciousness by the government which was supposed to be leading it.

It has taken the government two years to cripple the proletariat and its organisations. The POUM and the Friends of Durutti are gone. The revolutionary sections of the CNT-FAL are persecuted and the whole of the effective organisations of the workers compromised to such a degree as to allow the anti-working class government of Spain to proceed without fear of opposition. And thus today the capitalist government of the 'Popular Front' is slowly ending its task of liquidating the war and the Revolution.

The attack of the republican government and CP against the POUM is recognised by everyone. But the accusations are one thing and the facts another. The facts are that up to the present all the 'evidences' have been proven false, got up to deliberately incriminate the POUM and thus justify the process of legal murder desired by the government and CP.

There is absolutely nothing to incriminate the POUM, but the same cannot be said of their accusers. In the CP, the Labour Party or the Socialist youth dozens of traitors have been found, and many had wormed their way into very responsible positions in the High Command of the republican army. For instance we have seen the entire Karl Marx Division, men and officers, passing over into the Franco lines. Yet the government still gives these posts to similar men.

(August 1938)

'The Friends of Durutti Accuse'

by the Franco-Spanish Group of The Friends of Durruti

IT IS NECESSARY that the militants, the revolutionaries of the workers' organisations, who have suffered the cruel experience of military defeat and refugee humiliation, give serious and concentrated attention to the lessons of the Spanish war and revolution, for which they have paid so dearly with their blood, the blood of their best comrades.

Breaking the silence which was imposed on us by the tyranny of the Stalinists and counter-revolutionaries, we shall speak here with the same clarity as was expected in the organ of our group *The Friend Of The People*. Our group, which is under the symbol of Durruti, has occupied an important place in the Spanish Revolution. This was so in the bloody days of May, 1937, when we raised the standard of revolt against the counter-revolutionaries (the CP, Republican Government, etc.) as also against the reformism of the directors of the CNT-FAL.

We had predicted that the line pursued after July, of dissociating the war from the revolution, must inevitably lead to disaster. Our thesis has been confirmed by the facts. The Revolution was lost in May, 1937, AND WITH IT THE WAR. Gradually the zones of economic importance were lost, and the culmination was the fall of Aragon, a great defeat of the Levant, finishing with the rout of Catalonia and by the surrender of Madrid and the rest of the other zones without conditions.

The causes of the defeat were evident. From the moment that the revolutionary spirit of the militias was undermined by replacing them with an army lacking in the previous enthusiasm and dynamism, there was forged the first link in the chain which has now bound them to defeat.

The multiple attacks and disfigurations of the Revolutionary work of July, 1936, were the seeds of the tragic harvest which has led us to bloody exile, an exile which cannot be understood except when we comprehend the first moves of treason, incapacity, stabbing in the back and immorality which took place.

TWO CHANCES LOST

Two eminent periods presented themselves in the Spanish revolution: July, 1936, and May, 1937. On these two occasions, the same error was committed. The leaders of the CNT-FAI did not impose the power of our organisations, which were supported by the masses in the street, factory, field and workshop. These leaders were thus most responsible for the disaster which has taken place – the loss of the revolution, the military defeat in the war and the bloody retreat into France. They were afraid of foreign intervention. They did not want to take over the country and direct it economically and politically for fear of angering the ‘dictators’.

But in not leading the revolution, they did not leave it alone; they began to defeat it. Their fear was responsible for the counter-revolution, for the Stalinists took over the land from the peasants and workers, and this was the greatest factor in breaking the revolutionary unity of the masses.

The CNT-FAI leaders did not desire to impose a dictatorship on anti-working class parties, yet they became the assistants of the bourgeois liberals, of the petty bourgeoisie of international Capitalism, which, under the mask of democracy, served fascism, thus defeating the Spanish revolution.

The end of the war has been catastrophic. Everything was lost, nothing gained. Much could have been saved and used to stave off the terrible defeat. Negrin and all his lackies had placed all money and gold in foreign banks. They certainly made a job of the massacre of the Spanish people.

The army of the workers did not know what they were fighting for. The soldiers at the front were not disposed to fight because they knew that whilst they were fighting and being massacred on the Ebro, in the rear, the bureaucrats of the Republic were playing about with beautiful women and having a grand debauch.

The people were working and dying of hunger. In the bread queues the women and population generally were full of hate for Negrin and his crowd of adulators. The workers and their families had no bread, whilst in the homes and residences of the government and CP officials etc. white bread was eaten. The whole world has some idea of the morale of the people of Barcelona. It was the workers of Barcelona who suffered the aerial bombardments. There was no refuge for them. The high functionaries and bureaucrats were always well sheltered and their families were always hidden away in distant villages.

THE PEOPLE RESPONSIBLE

The government did not represent the people (workers) and defended interests decidedly opposed to them. Those who should have heard the demands of the Spanish working class, who were called upon to defend them, were the leaders of the CNT-FAI, who betrayed them. This we have affirmed, clearly and without subtlety, and we will always continue to repeat our indictments.

‘The Friends Of Durruti’ were called Fascists and provocateurs. Twice attempts were made to expel us from the CNT-FAI. But the workers rejected this order of exclusion, which came from the reformist section.

We have left Spain with our heads held high; we have entered foreign countries without a halfpenny. We have suffered hunger and cold in the concentration camps. But several of the reformists who demanded our expulsion are well cared for. We do not speak of Negrin and his communist murderers, who persecuted and imprisoned us. These people possess scandalous sums of money, but one day they will be made to pay for their treachery.

Events have proved us right. The same problems which we posed in our secret newspaper can be posed today, as also tomorrow. We are not beaten, and although this is a tragedy, we must stick to our principles and our criticisms. The reformism of the CNT-FAI has led us to defeat.

The leadership had an influential part in the giving up of Madrid, without any conditions, to Franco. The Stalinists, by their protests against the giving up of Madrid, have been able to pose as revolutionaries. But they did not deceive the workers, for they have always hated them, long before the initiative of Casado against them. They have hated them from the very early times of the revolution, particularly in the May days of 1937.

The lesson has been hard; and the immense importance and power of the Spanish revolution can be judged by the revolutionary effect it had on European affairs.

If the Spanish revolution had succeeded, Fascism would have been defeated, with the important consequence of the beginning of an international proletarian offensive. There is no doubt, the proletariat and capitalism have showed themselves to be permanently involved in a life and death struggle. Capitalism has triumphed, but we know the reasons.

Democracy defeated the Spanish people, not Fascism. Franco would never have won without the Communist Party and Negrin. But the international proletariat are also responsible; or rather, the leaders, who have become bulwarks for the capitalist class. But, if, instead of speaking in jargon and confused language, we had been frank and definite, who knows, perhaps we would have reached the workers of the entire world.

THE LESSONS

From the catastrophe we must extract precious lessons. As anarchists we must rectify a series of tactical points and positions which prevent the success of revolutionary action. A revolution necessitates force to be used against the opposition. It is also clear that when one possesses such a proletarian fighting force, it is necessary to know how to use it and how to preserve it.

We are enemies of class collaboration with the capitalist class and with the middle class. Workers' administration necessitates workers' control. A revolution requires the absolute domination of the workers' organisations as was the case in July, 1936, when the CNT-FAI were masters. There are many aspects of the situation and it would be necessary to study them in detail, but what must not be forgotten is that the workers' movement must be reconstructed on a new basis, on a new morale, and with the banishment of the leaders responsible for the disaster.

We incline to the view that it is necessary to form a Revolutionary Alliance; a Workers' Front; where no one would be allowed to enter and take their place except on a revolutionary basis, completely prohibiting reformists, communist party, republican democrats, and also those militants in the Spanish affair who had a hand in the disaster.

At the beginning of this emigration from our country, which began after 30 months of fighting, the 'Friends Of Durruti' continue to defend the interests of the proletariat with the same energy and honesty as during the course of the Spanish revolution.

(June-July 1939)