On the History of the Spanish Revolution of 1931 and the Part Played by the Left and Right-Wing Socialists and the Anarchists

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Nestor Makhno

Whenever a revolution breaks out - and regardless of its character - (the most important point is that broad masses of workers and peasants should have a hand in it) and its guides, whether a compact group or a scattering of individuals, enjoying a special authority in the eyes of the workers, place themselves above these masses and do not march in step with them and do not earn their trust,
waiting for something out of the ordinary to happen or even, worse still, seek to subordinate them by trying to point them along the "only" path to follow, well, the revolution fails to develop thoroughly enough and fails to resolve or even correctly formulate the attendant problems in need of resolution. Then it cannot devise new and additional methods of social action to thwart its enemies and meet the pressing needs: whereupon it is induced to adopt vague directions and gets lost amid their fatal zigzags. At that point, it either perishes under the blows of those against whom it is targeted, or it changes tack, doubles back on its steps and is wound up in accordance with the interests of its internal enemies.

Often, all these considerations have been decisive during the revolutions which have occurred thus far, both in Europe and elsewhere. The same thing has happened in Spain. True, the Spanish revolution of 1931 stands apart from lots of others on account of its very specific features. It was not unleashed by means of a revolutionary whirlwind in the towns and countryside, but rather by the ballot box. As it proceeded, thanks to the actions of its left-wing elements, it broke free of those initial moorings and entered the vast precincts of the liberating social action of the toilers. Whilst it nonetheless finished to the advantage of authoritarian elements, and proved tragic for the fate of the workers and many revolutionaries, as well as for what these had managed to achieve, the responsibility for that lies largely with the Spanish left-wing political groupings. That unfortunate denouement can be chalked up to the authoritarian and the anti-authoritarian socialists, which is to say to our libertarian communist and anarcho-syndicalist comrades.

The responsibility of the right-wing state socialists consists of their having been tied from the outset to the bourgeois party of Alcala Zamora. True, the grassroots militants of the party, especially the workers, did not want to hear talk of this policy, especially as they were not aware of the hidden negotiations of their party's "bigwigs" with the bourgeoisie, negotiations directed at their assuming joint power, albeit at the price of sacrificing the revolution. It was only when the socialist workers found themselves under questioning from other workers about their party's policy, and had no idea how to reply, that their leaders hypocritically strutted like peacocks before the bourgeoisie, striking a little fear into its representatives by declaring themselves ready to seize power alone with the aid of the workers only. This double dealing by the socialist leaders regarding the revolution, mounted
despite the pretenses by taking cognizance of the aspirations of the workers as represented by other social revolutionary organizations, nonetheless sowed the most utter confusion in the minds and understanding of the workers as far as the developing revolution was concerned, and in the last analysis it eroded the best and most combative features of their struggle, everything that had enabled them to score a complete and enthusiastic victory over the monarchists and the king.

The Spanish toilers sensed instinctively that the time had come for new and free forms of social living. The right-wing socialist "bigwigs" pretended outwardly to congratulate themselves on this, but in fact and in secret they worked to disappoint these aspirations, and in so doing they did enormous harm to the first steps of the revolution.

The guilt of the Bolshevik-communists - they who are "further to the left than the left" of the state socialists, so to speak - resides in their having done nothing on behalf of the cause of real emancipation of the workers, but instead only for their own sordid and petty partizan interests. They saw the revolution as a means whereby they might, at their ease, stuff proletarian heads with the most demagogic promises and then, having sucked them into the authoritarian vortex, use them bodily to hoist their filthy party dictatorship into position over the country. When they realized that their demagogic ploys were making no headway with the toilers, they suborned or deceived a few adventurist elements into organizing violent demonstrations, whilst drawing the unarmed workers into them. These demonstrations, however, brought them no success either. Blood flowed freely during these workers' defeats, dreamed up by people who kept well out of the action. All of which merely strengthened the coalition between the right wing socialists and Alcala Zamora and the bourgeoisie, bolstering it not just against the left's "would-be dictators," but also against the revolution generally. As for the Bolshevik "communists," they belong to the same Marxist-Leninist school as their Russian counterparts: they are nothing more than Jesuits and traitors to all who struggle against Capital and for the emancipation of the proletariat whilst refusing to pass between their Caudine Forks. During the Spanish revolution of 1931, they were not strong enough - and still are not - to display their treachery openly. Even so, they have successfully mounted several provocations and peddled calumnies, not so much against the bourgeoisie as against their political adversaries on the
That fact partly accounts for the difficulty the revolution has experienced in ridding itself of bourgeois thinking and bourgeois leaders, for it has had to fight simultaneously against the demoralization peddled by these "leftist" traitors. The latter operate on the behalf of their dictatorship and not for the sake of real social freedom, which blends the solidarity and equality of opinion of all who have made the radical break with the onerous past of exploitation and who are striding right now towards a new world.

Spanish libertarian communists and anarcho-syndicalists have a particular responsibility in the shaping of events, above all because they departed from their basic principles in taking an active part in that revolution, so as to wrest the initiative from the liberal bourgeoisie, no doubt, but whilst remaining, regardless, on the latter's parasitical class terrain. They have, for one thing, taken absolutely no notice of the requirements of our age, and for another, they have under-estimated the scale of the resources available to the bourgeoisie in containing and eliminating all who create trouble for it.

What has stopped anarchists from putting their beliefs into practice, so as to turn a bourgeois republican revolution into a social revolution?

In the first place, the absence of a specific and detailed program has prevented them from achieving unity of action, the unity that determines the expansion of the movement during a period of revolution and of its influence over everything around it.

Secondly, our Spanish comrades, like many comrades elsewhere, regard anarchism as an itinerant church of freedom. . . That attitude regularly prevents them from arriving at the desired times and places at the working structures essential to the economic and social organization whose duty it is to weave multiple connections between the everyday and global struggle of the toilers. This has thwarted them, on this occasion, from accomplishing the historical task that devolves upon anarchism in time of revolution. For all the prestige they enjoyed in the eyes of the workers in the country, Spanish libertarian communists and anarcho-syndicalists have failed to tilt in the direction of revolution the minds of masses dithering between their sympathy with revolution and a petit-bourgeois outlook. They ought to have been converted into activists for the spread and defense of the revolution. Instead of which, feeling themselves surrounded by
relative freedom, the anarchists, like so many petit-bourgeois, have indulged themselves in interminable discussions. By word of mouth and in writing, they have expounded absolutely freely on all manner of topics: they have held rallies galore, with fine professions of faith, but they have overlooked the fact that those who supplanted the king spent that time entrenching their power to the best of their ability.

Unfortunately, in this regard, not a thing was done at the appropriate time, even though that was as vital as could be, given that the occasion was ideal and the circumstances favorable. At that point, the Spanish anarchists had real opportunities - a lot more than all the other revolutionary groupings in the country - to settle in practice upon a strategy that would have brought the revolution a step closer. The CNT expanded its membership at a dizzying rate and became, for all who labor, the spokesman and the forum through which the toilers' age-old hopes might at last find expression.

In order to play up this active role of our movement even more, the bourgeoisie and its power should have been felled and its influence upon the revolutionary movement eradicated utterly. Does this mean that our Spanish comrades achieved nothing along these lines during that revolutionary year of 1931? Certainly not. They did all in their power to convert the political revolution into social revolution. Heroically, they shouldered the sacrifices of that, and even now that the revolution has been smothered, many of them are still enduring the rigors of repression. However, all such sacrifices have been in vain, to the extent that they were not made for the sake of suitable objectives. And all, let me repeat, because anarchism possesses no hard and fast program, because the anarchist activities that have been carried out have been, and are still, conducted amid the most utter dispersion, rather than springing from a tactical unity determined and enlightened by a theoretical unity, by a single shared goal. It is for these specific reasons that the Spanish anarchists have not been able to bring their endeavors to fruition and it is this that induced the ones whose convictions were weakest to issue the celebrated "Manifesto of the Thirty" - quite ill-timed - in the name of its authors' "heightened sense of responsibility." The most determined and intrepid militants, the ones that do not merely peddle their ideas but also go to the lengths of dying for them, those ones languish in filthy dungeons, in the holds of vessels deporting
them to distant shores, to hostile lands.

Such, in broad outline, are the omissions, errors and shortcomings fatal for revolutionary activity that have been perpetrated by Spanish leftist groupings, at a decisive moment that comes but rarely in history and which has brought the Spanish revolution to its present straits. All those groups therefore carry the responsibility for the situation.

What conclusions the statist socialists, they who can do nothing better than play the lackeys of the bourgeoisie, whilst seeking to make lackeys of their own of other revolutionaries, will draw from this I cannot tell. As far as revolutionary anarchists are concerned, I believe they have food for thought here, if they are to be spared in the future [whether in Spain or elsewhere] from a repetition of these same mistakes: finding themselves in the revolution's advanced outposts without access to the resources necessary for defense of the masses' revolutionary gains against the bitter onslaughts of their bourgeois and authoritarian socialist foes.

Obviously, revolutionary anarchists must not have recourse to the methods of Bolsheviks as some have occasionally been tempted to do, even to the extent of urging the establishment of "close contact" with the Bolshevik state (as the "innovator" Arshinov has lately argued). Revolutionary anarchists have nothing to look for in Bolshevism: they have a revolutionary theory of their own that is indeed very rich, and which lays down tasks utterly at odds with those of the Bolsheviks in the life and struggle of the toiling classes. They cannot reconcile their goals with the goals of Pan-Bolshevism, which thrusts itself so savagely, by ruble and bayonet, into the lives of the toilers in the USSR, deliberately ignoring their rights and turning them into compliant slaves, incapable of independent reflection, or thinking for themselves about their welfare and the welfare of the other toilers in the world.

No matter how devoted it may be to the movement's cause, no anarchist individual or group can carry out the tasks described all unaided. All attempts made thus far testify to that. Why is understandable: no individual or group can, unaided, unite our movement, nationally or internationally. These mammoth and crucial tasks can only be accomplished by an international libertarian think-tank. That is what I told Rudolf Rocker and Alexander Berkman in Berlin nearly seven years ago now. And I reaffirm it all the more staunchly now, now that many libertarians openly acknowledge - after a whole series of fruitless attempts to devise something
practical - that there is no other way of arriving at a program shaped by and
attuned to our times and our resources, than by the calling of a preparatory
conference, (involving those militants most active and committed in matters
theoretical and practical alike) the task of which would be formulate the theses that
would respond to the anarchist movement's vital issues, theses thrashed out in
anticipation of an international anarchist congress. The latter in turn would develop
and complement these theses. In the wake of that congress, these theses would
amount to a definite program and solid reference point for our movement, a
reference point with a validity in every country. Which would rescue our movement
from reformist and muddle-headed deviations and invest it with the necessary
potency to become the vanguard of contemporary revolutions.

True, this is no easy undertaking: however, determination and solidarity from
those who can and who wish to carry it off will greatly facilitate this endeavor. Let
this undertaking commence, for our movement cannot but gain by it!

Long live the fraternal and shared hopes of all Anarchist militants that they may
see the realization of that grand undertaking - the endeavor of our movement and
of the social revolution for which we struggle!

France 1931

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