



## Barcelona 1936: a Workers' Revolution<sup>1</sup>

*What would a revolution look like? How would people power and workers' power operate? Of course, it will partly depend on circumstances but we can also learn from past experience. In this article **Andy Durgan** offers a vivid picture of one the greatest actual examples of workers' power: Barcelona in 1936. His account brings out the immense radicalism, energy and creativity of a risen people while not losing sight of the point made by Marx in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* that socialism, in its initial phase, 'as it emerges from capitalist society... is still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges'.*

### **Workers and the city**

During the summer of 1936 Barcelona witnessed, in words of historian Chris Ealham "the biggest revolutionary fiesta in twentieth century Europe". A revolution that had its roots in the city's turbulent past and in the unique nature of its workers' movement.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Barcelona was the scene of social and political violence and popular uprisings. Friedrich Engels described the Catalan

capital as "one of the most revolutionary cities in Europe". It was also the industrial centre of the Spanish state; textiles, as in Britain, having provided the motor of the Catalan industrial revolution. Working and living conditions were hard and wages low. A sixty hour working week was the norm. Women, who were the majority of textile workers, earned half of what male workers did. Child labour was common. Social services were largely non-existent.

During the First War, given Spain's neutrality, the port of Barcelona was well-placed to supply goods for both contending sides leading to further expansion of local industry. The contraction of the Catalan economy after the war combined with the impact of the Russian revolution to provide the backdrop to the bitter class struggle that tore through the city in the post-war years.

While elsewhere in Europe the new communist parties offered a revolutionary alternative to reformism, in Spain this alternative was provided by anarchism. Barcelona's working class, in particular, were largely impervious to social democratic gradualism. Trade unions in the city came up against employer intransigence and state repression. A lack of legal or institutional channels further hindered the development of peaceful labour relations.

Between 1890 and 1920, 450,000 migrants arrived in the city, doubling its population. Many of these newly arrived workers, often lacking either political or trade union traditions, proved particularly open to the militant apoliticism of the anarcho-syndicalist *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT), which had been founded in 1910.<sup>2</sup>

The CNT stressed the need for organisation from below. Administration was minimal and there were hardly any full-time organisers. As a result, many workers, while considering themselves represented by the CNT, did not pay dues. Union organisation was thus highly unstable. This instability was compounded by repression and the murderous activities of the employer-backed *Sindicatos Libres* whose members provided both scabs and armed thugs who gunned down scores of CNT activists. Yet despite such opposition, the CNT was a formidable adversary.

At the centre of the CNT's organisation was the *Sindicato Unico* ("One Union"), which united workers across sectional or company boundaries. As a result, solidarity was embedded into the fibre of the local workers' movement. For instance the CNT Transport Union united ten thousand workers throughout the city in the 1930s, linking bus and metro workers to lorry drivers and dockers. Strikes called by the *Sindicato Unico* could quickly bring the city to a standstill.

Anarcho-syndicalist organisation was not limited to the workplace. During the years before the Civil War, CNT-backed community organisation was extensive in the poorer neighbourhoods, organising alternative

forms of distribution of food or the defence of tenants. Thousands of workers also participated in anarchist-run *Ateneos Populares* (People's Athenaeums) which provided evening classes in everything from foreign languages to physics or political philosophy. Proletarian Sports and Walking Clubs were equally popular. Anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist ideas were also spread through the CNT's daily press and literature. The all encompassing nature of the CNT helps both explain its ability to defeat the military uprising in July 1936 and the depth of the subsequent revolutionary movement.

The great mass of CNT members could not be considered as strictly "anarchist" in outlook. Ideological purity was maintained inside the union through the work of relatively small affinity groups, often affiliated to the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (FAI). Such groups not only propagated anarchist ideas in the neighbourhoods and workplaces but were also often involved in "direct action". Revolutionary violence, which had already emerged in the city's workers' movement in the 1890s, had become common place by the 1920s. Anarchist militants played a central role in the CNT's Defence Committees which defended union activity, particularly during strikes, carried out "expropriations" and acted against bosses and their gunmen.

The establishment of a democratic Republic in 1931 opened up a new period of agitation. Despite the military dictatorship of 1923-1930, the CNT had survived. Over the next five years, under the leadership of the FAI, the CNT launched a series of militant strikes and insurrectionary movements. It also grew massively. By the end of 1931 it claimed 180,000 members in Barcelona alone, over half the city's industrial workers.

Thousands more workers were organised in often small independent or Marxist-led unions. But only among office and shop workers, whose general strike on the eve of the Civil War brought the city to a standstill, were the anarcho-syndicalists overshadowed by unions led by the revolutionary socialist *Partit Obrer d'Unificació Marxista* (POUM). The party was stronger in the interior of Catalonia; albeit in Barcelona it controlled a dozen or so unions, had influence in several *Ateneos* and ran a popular "Proletarian Sports Club".

The moderation of the first Republican government (1931-1933) and its use of repression against strikers and the CNT further radicalised sections of the working class. Under threat from an increasingly aggressive Right

and the bloody suppression of the revolutionary general strike in Asturias in October 1934 (called to oppose the entry of the authoritarian right into the government), the Left united in the Popular Front. This included both the workers' parties and the liberal Republicans and, with the effective support of the CNT, won the elections of February 1936. The Right now dropped all pretence to support legality and opted to organise a coup.

### **The people in arms**

In the days before the military uprising, the CNT's Defence Committees positioned themselves outside the city's barracks. When soldiers came out onto the streets in the early hours of 19 July they were immediately attacked by poorly armed workers behind barricades and from the rooftops. Sirens in factories and on ships in the port alerted the city of the danger. A general strike was declared. Thousands more workers soon joined the Defence Committees and other combatants, such as the POUM's Action Groups, on the barricades. Faced with this mobilisation, the paramilitary Republican Assault Guards stood with the workers. Even the hated Civil Guard wisely remained loyal in Barcelona to the Republic. Leaflets were dropped by the small Republican air force on the rebels urging them to surrender.

The heroic resistance of the workers soon broke the back of the military rebellion in the city. Rank and file soldiers refused to fire on the workers, and abandoned their officers, if not turning their arms on them. By the end of the day thousands of weapons were in the hands of the most radical sections of the working class. Arms were taken from soldiers or also found on ships in the harbours. Gun shops were ransacked. Most importantly, the CNT stormed the artillery barracks in the Sant Andreu district, seizing 30,000 rifles. By the 20<sup>th</sup> only the officers in the Drassanes Barracks at the end of the Rambles still resisted. After six hours of fighting the final assault finished off the military rebellion. During the two days fighting, over 500 people had been killed, around 180 of them military rebels or their civilian allies.

Once the army had been defeated in Barcelona, the urgent task for the workers' organisations was the liberation of territory in neighbouring Aragon. Militias were hastily organised made up of workers, demobilised soldiers and some police units. Loyal army officers served as military advisors but the militia columns

were headed by leading members of the workers' organisations. The militias were also joined by athletes who had come to take part in the People's Olympics, due to start that week in Barcelona as an alternative to the Nazi-run Olympics in Berlin.

On 23 July, the first Militia Column under the anarchist leader Benaventura Durruti headed for the front; followed by a further CNT Column the next day and another made up by members of the Marxist organisations. The militias took the revolution with them into Aragon; helping peasants set up committees in the villages and collectivise the land.

In Barcelona itself there was now no other authority but the workers' organisations. Road blocks and controls proliferated. In the coming days hundreds of known rightists were detained; many were summarily executed. This repression has to be seen in context of years of violence directed against the working class by the state and the employers; and was further fuelled by news of massacres by fascist forces in the rest of Spain. A proliferation of committees imposed class justice in their own neighbourhoods and launched punitive raids into bourgeois areas; usually in cars requisitioned from the rich.

Spontaneous killings were soon brought under control by the workers' organisations. This would contrast with the far more extensive and systematic terror organised on the fascist side that would continue for years after the war's end. The CNT, often unjustly accused of being behind so-called "uncontrollable" groups, even executed some of its own members for looting and murder.

In order to bring this repression under control, unified "Control Patrols" made up of members of worker's and anti-fascist organisations were established. Half the Patrols' seven hundred components were from the CNT. Revolutionary tribunals were also set up to try suspected military rebels and leading members of counter-revolutionary organisations. Among those tried and executed was the head of the coup in Barcelona, General Manuel Goded. When captured Goded had been protected from the enraged crowd by Assault Guards and leading members of the Catalan Communist Party, including Claridad Mercader who would later, in Mexico, play her part in the assassination of Trotsky by her son Ramon.

Among the two thousand victims of repression in Barcelona during the war were police torturers, slum

landlords, priests and rightists. There was, however, no attempt to eliminate the bourgeoisie as a class. Most factory owners killed were seen as abusive employers or traitors. Many of the wealthy had already fled or were on holiday so escaped retribution. Not all the victims were from the rich and powerful: forty percent of them were members of the *Sindicatos Libres*.

### **The city transformed.**

As many visitors would note, including George Orwell five months later, the city was transformed in the weeks after 19 July. The revolution took over the streets, filling the city with brightly coloured banners, posters, flags and portraits of revolutionary leaders. The red and black of the anarchists, and the red of the Marxists, was everywhere. Not only on buildings, but neck scarves and badges now sold on dozens of stalls on the Rambles. Some of the items on sale were surprising. American Trotskyist Lois Orr described how on “the little stands on the Rambles everywhere they sell pins, scarves and statues of Popeye waving the anarchist flag... Betty Boop is also much in favour among the anarchists...”.

Anti-fascist speeches and revolutionary songs were broadcasted over loudspeakers by occupied radio stations. “Radio POUM”, for instance, also broadcasted to the rest of Spain and parts of Europe, and included regular transmissions in French, German, English, Russian, Italian, Portuguese and Esperanto. Revolutionary propaganda filled the newsstands. Right wing newspapers were closed down, their print shops now turning out the daily press of the revolution. The anarcho-syndicalist daily *Solidaridad Obrera* soon had a print run of 200,000.

A new revolutionary morality imprinted itself on the city. On 21 July the CNT banned the sale of alcohol. Tipping was prohibited in restaurants or bars. Instead of *adéu*, with its reference to God, *salut* became the standard way of saying “goodbye”.

Clothing ceased to mark social divisions. A proletarian “dress code” was soon imposed. Workers’ overalls, the new militia “uniform”, became omnipresent on the streets. Hats, ties and suits disappeared. People wearing them were met with hostility. Such was the decline in demand for hats that the POUM-led hatters union launched a campaign in their favour.

Trains were initially free so many families took advantage to rush to the countryside to see relatives or to bring back food. Some militants even took a free ride

to Madrid to “visit the front”.

What became known as “revolutionary motoring” took over the streets. Vehicles confiscated by the workers’ organisations became a common sight in the first days of the revolution speeding through the city with the party or union initials painted on their sides. The general absence of conventional driving norms, such as stopping at traffic lights, added to what bourgeois observers saw as the frightening chaos of a world turned upside down.

The workers’ organisations set about occupying buildings. In Via Laietana (later renamed Via Durruti), the massive employers’ association headquarters became the *Casa CNT-FAI* and the main police station was occupied by the Defence Committees. In the Rambles, the POUM alone occupied six major buildings: including two hotels, a theatre, a radio station and the Virreina Palace.

Other buildings were converted into hospitals, social centres and schools. There was a huge expansion of educational provision. Between July 1936 and June 1937 the number of children receiving free education increased from 34,000 to 117,000. Hotels often became popular canteens under the control of the unions, offering cheap meals to the population. Vouchers were issued by the unions for such communal eating houses. The plush Hotel Ritz became *Hotel Gastronomic N°1* under union control, providing meals for militia members, the poor and factory workers. Private homes of the wealthy were converted into orphanages or housing for the homeless, the aged, those living in overcrowded accommodation and refugees. Names of streets were changed. Engels, Spartacus and Kropotkin all had streets. Others were named after those killed in the fighting in July or at the front.

Theatres, music halls and cinemas were now run by their workers. The prestigious Barcelona Opera House became the Catalan People’s Theatre. Performances were often dedicated to the “heroic militias”. Bullfighting however, much to the disgust of some foreign observers, survived. But even in the bullrings the band began by playing the *Internationale* and bull fighters gave clenched fist salutes.

### **Purging the old**

A particular target of working class ire was the church. There was a long tradition of anti-clericalism in Spain. The Catholic Church was perceived as a corrupter of the

masses and an ally of ruling class. For revolutionaries and reformers alike, the elimination of the church's influence from everyday life was seen as necessary for social progress. Republican Government attempts to undermine the power of the church was a central justification for the military uprising. The church itself played a key role in the emerging Fascist regime, actively supporting its war of extermination against the Left. As a response there was widespread destruction of ecclesiastical property and over six thousand members of the clergy were killed throughout the Republican zone during the Civil War.

In Barcelona there were a hundred or so clerical victims during the first weeks of the war. Many churches throughout the city were burned to the ground. The rest were converted into store rooms, garages, meeting halls or secular schools. The Austrian journalist Franz Borkenau described the burning of a church as an "administrative" act, with the fire brigade on hand to avoid the fire spreading to other buildings. Objects of value, if not burnt, were used to fund the war effort. Church bells were melted down for the war industry.

Catholicism was the target for retribution rather than religion in general. Upon being informed that the first church set on fire in Barcelona was protestant, the perpetrators helped the fire brigade extinguish the flames. Other Protestant churches and the city's synagogue were unscathed by the masses' anti-clerical wrath.

Invasions of church property were often accompanied by popular fiestas. Processions of workers dressed up in religious clothes carrying liturgical objects held mock ceremonies. Statues were clothed in militia uniforms or even "executed". Tombs of priests and nuns were sometimes profaned; mummified bodies being put on display outside churches.

In a country dominated by the church and rural conservatism, the changes in women's lives after July 1936 were initially striking. Women had only recently obtained basic legal and political rights under the Republic; voting for the first time in 1933.

The transformation in women's lives was most visible in revolutionary Barcelona. Many women now entered into socio-political activity for the first time. Women's organisations, such as the anarchist *Mujeres Libres* or the Communist *Unió de Dones de Catalunya*, flourished. A minority of women took up arms, fighting

on the streets in July and going with the militias to the front. With increasing numbers of men at the front, women entered the workplace *en masse*.

Women's lives changed in other ways. *Mujeres Libres* organised a campaign against prostitution; urging the CNT to close down brothels and working to integrate prostitutes into other fields of work. As in revolutionary Russia, reproductive rights were for the first time protected: sexual education was openly promoted and contraception became widely available. Catalonia became the first country since the Russian revolution to provide free abortion on demand. Civil marriage in union headquarters replaced religious ceremonies. Divorce became the right of all men and women without legal impediment.

The revolution provided the context for the beginnings of women's liberation but not its fulfilment. Although women participated in "public life" on an unprecedented scale, their principle role was in support of the war effort: be it as nurses or cooks at the front or sewing uniforms and running schools in the rearguard. While free and equal partnerships became far more common between men and women it would misleading to exaggerate the changes that took place. Unlike in revolutionary Russia there was no questioning of traditional sexual norms. Pornography was still to be found on stalls on the Rambles, alongside revolutionary literature. Women were still harassed in the streets. Even prostitution soon returned.

### Collectivisation

The collectivisation of industry and agriculture during the Spanish revolution amounted to one of the most radical socio-economic transformations seen in the twentieth century. It was largely a spontaneous movement. The CNT only officially called on workers to seize their workplaces two weeks after the process was under way. Workers now put into practice concepts that they had learned from their organisations about running society and the economy.

There was also a practical side to collectivisation: production had to be maintained and supplies provided for the population and the front. Although in most cases bosses had fled, were hiding or had been killed, some remained, working alongside their former employees, or even as part of the collectives' management.

In Barcelona around three thousand enterprises,

seventy percent of the city's industry, were taken over by the workers. Most services, especially transport, were also collectivised. An exception was banking. The anarcho-syndicalists refused to take over banks as a matter of principle; in some cases burning bank notes in order to allay suspicion of robbery.

It was soon clear to the unions that in order for collectivisation to work there was an urgent need for coordination and some form of planning. Most industries set up associations of factories in any sector or geographical location. The larger associations in Barcelona included electricity, grouping together 11,500 workers, construction with 11,000, public entertainment with 10,000, and wood workers with 8,000. The Associations sought, with varying degrees of success, to simplify decision making and reduce bureaucracy. Administration and commercial operations were centralised; middle men, for instance in food distribution, often being cut out.

The highest decision-making body was the General Assembly of all workers in any Association, which decided on general strategy. Below this was the Factory Council, elected by the workers, which ran the enterprise on a daily basis, and was sub-divided into specialised committees. Most members of Factory Councils worked on the shop floor. A Union Committee guaranteed workers rights and health and safety.

In some factories ambitious educational programmes and libraries were organised. Social services were provided, including free medical attention, accident benefits, post-natal care and pensions. Crèches were established in factories to help the integration of women into the workforce.

A central problem for the new economy was the tendency for enterprises to still compete with each other. The CNT countered this by arguing in favour of the "socialisation" of any particular section or industry. Socialisation meant collectives being integrated into the wider needs of the revolution. This process went furthest in the wood industry where the number of enterprises in the city was streamlined from eighty to four.

Despite multiple difficulties the collectivist experiment was relative successful. Apart from maintaining production, innovations were introduced to cut costs, augment productivity and improve the quality of goods. However, due to the war there was often a lack of raw materials and internal markets

were disrupted. Many collectivised enterprises were boycotted by international capital. Added to this was the difficulty of overcoming old mentalities and habits among the workers, who remained in many cases, understandably, alienated from the work process. Such problems were soon compounded by the disinterest, if not sabotage, of the Republican authorities which had little sympathy for the revolution.

### **The question of power**

From the very beginning of the conflict, the Left was divided over whether this was a war in defence of democracy, as the Popular Front parties argued, or that the war was inseparable from the revolution.

In Republican Spain, rather than "dual power", as had existed in Russia in 1917 before the Bolshevik-led seizure of power in October, power was fragmented in the hands of hundreds of local, militia and workplace committees. At a municipal level most committees were set up by the workers' and left organisations rather than being elected "from below" and contained representatives of Popular Front parties as well as the revolutionary groups. In Barcelona, in contrast, defence and other local committees had close links with the base; most notably the "Federation of Barricades" which was set up on the night of 19 July. In the early days of the revolution these committees imposed a form of proletarian dictatorship on streets of Barcelona.

But anarchist opposition to all states on principal meant the CNT had no interest in converting this plethora of committees into the basis of a "revolutionary government". A meeting of CNT delegates on 21 July opted to reject the establishment of a "libertarian dictatorship" in favour of "collaboration", which meant subordinating the revolution to the existence of the democratic Republic.

On the night of 20 July, the CNT leaders had met with Lluís Companys, the left Republican President of the Catalan Government (the Generalitat). Companys offered to stand down; an offer the anarchists rejected both in the name of anti-fascist unity and because of their disinterest in "taking power". Instead, the CNT accepted Companys' suggestion that a body with representatives of all anti-fascist organisations should be set up to coordinate military operations and security in the rearguard. The *Comité Central de Milícies Antifeixistes* (CCMA) was established the following

day on the basis of fifteen representatives, the majority from organisations that supported the Popular Front (Republicans and Communists); the anarchists had five delegates, the POUM one.

The CCMA's immediately imposed a curfew and authorised the formation of militias. However, it soon assumed wider responsibilities such as transport and communications, supplies, the setting up of a war industry, education and, in particular, internal security. Although acting like a government, the CCMA shared power with the Generalitat. Thus, for instance, on 11 August the Catalan Government established the Economic Council of Catalonia (CEC) to coordinate the new economy. All the anti-fascist organisations had representatives on the CEC on the same basis as the CCMA. Its programme, written by POUM leader Andreu Nin, aimed at "the socialist transformation" of the Catalan economy. The CNT hoped the CEC would "strengthen the revolution" but, as would soon become clear, the Generalitat sought to use it to bring the revolution under control and bypass the workers' organisations.

The logic of collaboration was that there should be only one political and military authority in Catalonia. On 26 September, the CCMA accepted a proposal by the CNT to dissolve itself and all the anti-fascist and workers' organisations joined a new Generalitat "Council" (thus avoiding the word "government").

In the first two months of its existence the Generalitat Council "legalised" the revolution by stipulating the basis for collectivisation and recognising many of the measures already taken by the workers' organisations. Like the CCMA, the new Generalitat Council had a Popular Front majority but in the absence of revolutionary democracy from below, and with the military situation deteriorating, the revolution was gradually undermined. The recuperation of bourgeois Republican power would culminate with fighting on Barcelona's streets between revolutionaries and forces of the Generalitat in May 1937. The withdrawal of the workers from the barricades, at the behest of the CNT, marked the definitive end of the process that had begun the previous July.

● Andy Durgan is a socialist historian. He has lived in Barcelona since 1982 and is author of *The Spanish Civil War*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2007.

### Further reading in English:

Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit. An eyewitness account of the Spanish Civil War*, Phoenix, London 2000.

Andy Durgan, 'Workers' Democracy in the Spanish Revolution, 1936-1937', in Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini (eds.), *Ours to Master and to Own. Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present*, Haymarket Books, Chicago 2011.

Antoni Castells, 'Revolution and collectivisation in Civil War Barcelona 1936-9', in Angel Smith (ed.), *Red Barcelona. Social Protest and Labour Mobilization in the Twentieth Century*, Routledge, London 2002.

Chris Ealham, *Anarchism and the City. Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Barcelona 1898-1937*, AK Press, Edinburgh 2010. Chris Ealham 'The myth of the maddened crowd: class, culture and space in the revolutionary urbanist project in Barcelona 1936-1937' in Chris Ealham and Michael Richards (eds.) *The Splintering of Spain, 1936-1945: New Historical Perspectives on the Spanish Civil War*, Cambridge University Press 2005.

Agustín Guillamón, *Barricades in Barcelona: The CNT from the victory of July 1936 to the necessary defeat of May 1937*, Christie Books, Hastings 2016.

Nick Lloyd, *Forgotten Places. Barcelona and the Spanish Civil War*, Barcelona 2015.

Mary Low and Juan Brea, *Red Spanish Notebook*, City Lights, San Francisco 1979.

Lois Orr, *Letters from Barcelona. An American Woman in Revolution and Civil War*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2009.

### Notes:

1 This article aims at an overview of workers' revolution in Barcelona in the summer of 1936; for a Marxist analysis, which covers such questions as the nature of workers' power and the role of the revolutionary party, see: Pierre Broué, *The Revolution and the Civil War in Spain*, Chicago 2008; also: Andy Durgan, *Marxism, War and Revolution: Trotsky and the POUM, Revolutionary History Vol. 9 No2*, 2006.

2 The terms "anarcho-syndicalism" and "anarchism" are often used interchangeably; however anarcho-syndicalism was a tendency inside anarchism, which specifically defended the role of revolutionary trade union methods and organisation, in particular the general strike, to overthrow capitalism. Most of the CNT's leaders and cadre were anarchists in the more general sense of the word, rejecting participation in "politics", advocating "direct action" and the establishment libertarian communism.