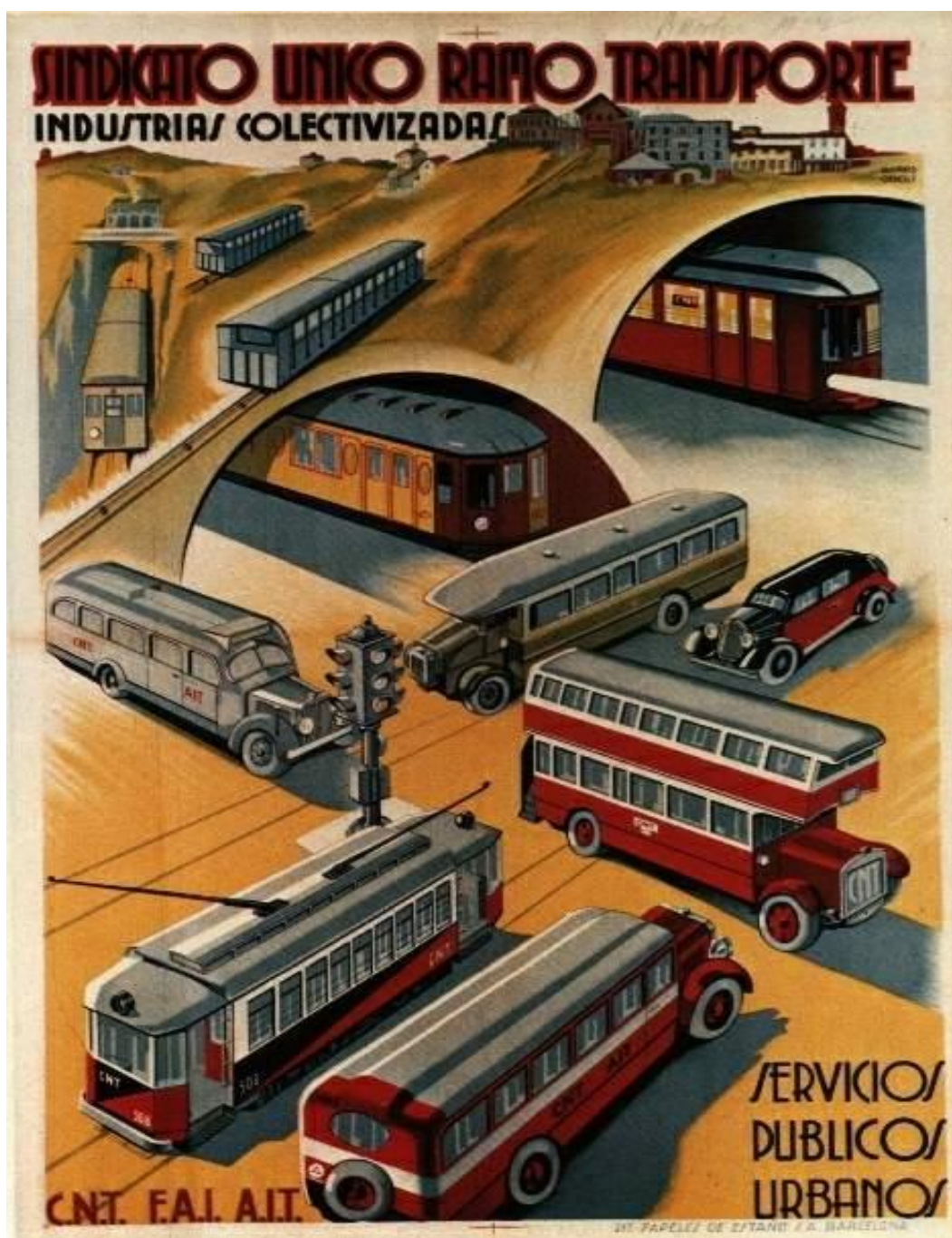


Anarchist Political School

The Spanish Revolution



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The Anarchist Political School is a project of the Anarchist Communist Federation. For more information, check out our website ancomfed.org



Why Study the Spanish Revolution?

Most people have at least heard of the Russian Revolution and are aware that the Soviet Union existed. Today, if you want to talk about revolutionary socialism, you have to deal with what happened in Russia in 1917.

The Spanish Revolution of 1936, on the other hand, is usually ignored. Many people have no idea that this revolution ever happened, or that a large, organised anarchist movement was the driving force behind it.

What is usually called ‘the Spanish Civil War’ (1936-1939) was really a struggle between revolution and counter-revolution. Workers and peasants established the largest experiment in real socialism ever seen, with workers running industry and agriculture for themselves, without bosses or politicians. The collectives established in the countryside were the closest a revolution has ever come to the full realisation of communism.

We should study this heroic example and learn from its incredible achievements. Workers have taken control of society before, and we can do it again. However, we should also learn from the mistakes and failures of the Spanish anarchists, so that we can be stronger and go even further next time.

Anarchism in Spain: The CNT and FAI

From the 1870s to the 1930s, the greatest threat to the Spanish ruling class was the rapid rise of revolutionary socialism. In Spain, this primarily took the form of anarchism. Anarchists spread their ideas by writing articles, holding educational meetings, and by organising in their workplaces. Through winning strikes, anarchists proved the value of their ideas. By 1910, their influence in the labour movement led to the founding of the National Confederation of Labour (CNT).

The CNT was a federation of unions controlled from the bottom-up by its members. It embraced using direct action, rather than relying on political parties or backroom negotiations between union officials and bosses. The anarchist influence was so strong that the CNT ultimately adopted an explicit commitment to establishing communism through anarchist methods.

The Spanish anarchists called this strategy 'anarcho-syndicalism'. The CNT was supported by a network of anarchist newspapers, social-centres, and anarchist-run schools. Later, the CNT would establish an armed wing in the form of defence committees. The patient organising within these networks, over a period of decades, would lay the basis for revolution to eventually break out in 1936.

Afraid that non-revolutionary members within the CNT would be tempted to embrace either reformism or working with the state, a loose network of anarchist groups formed the Federation of Iberian Anarchists (FAI). The FAI was united by a shared understanding that there needed to be a group which could argue for anarchist principles within the CNT. However, the groups which made up the FAI had competing ideas about how anarchist groups should be structured, what an anarchist strategy should look like, and how a revolution should be made.

As late as June 1936 (just a month before the revolution), major differences of opinion were still being debated in FAI meetings. An influential anarchist group called Nosotros argued that force was necessary in revolution, and that workers and peasants needed to establish their own power to overthrow capitalism. In response, a group called the 'A group' argued that this contradicted anarchism, because anarchists are against coercion. Both sides felt the other was breaking with anarchism—yet they remained members of the same organisation.

Discuss

Should the FAI have split because of the political differences within the organisation?

The Right-Wing Coup

Determined to see a right-wing government thrown out of office, the various Republican and left-wing parties in Spain ran as a united 'Popular Front' in the 1936 election and won.

At first, many workers were excited by the idea of a left-wing government, but they quickly became frustrated. The Popular Front was unable to give workers real power over the bosses and landowners. In response, workers and peasants took it upon themselves to launch a wave of strikes, land seizures, and political violence against the ruling class. Where the Popular Front stalled—for example, not following through on releasing anarchist and trade union prisoners—strikes forced them to act.

There was a real fear that revolution could break out at any moment, so key military figures started planning a coup to overthrow the republic. The ruling class desperately wanted to keep the working class under control and increasingly spoke about this as a justification for fascism.

The architect of the coup was the far-right General Emilio Mola, who enlisted General Francisco Franco to lead the uprising from his base in Spanish-occupied Morocco. Together, they united monarchists, fascists,

Catholic fundamentalists, and a Moroccan mercenary force to form the **Nationalist** counter-revolution.

Conventional histories say that the Nationalists were fighting **Republicans**: people loyal to the elected government and parliamentary democracy. However, the main enemies of the Nationalists were revolutionary socialists, not republicans. The revolutionaries differed from the republicans in believing that their fight couldn't be limited to a war against fascism. Instead, they saw the struggle against the coup as an opportunity to fight for communism.

Discuss

Should anarchists fight for parliamentary democracy (i.e., republicanism) against fascism?

Revolution

On the 17th of July, the coup began in Spanish-controlled Morocco. Poor Moroccan soldiers were promised high pay, the possibility of independence from colonial rule, and greater religious rights if they served on the side of the Nationalists.

Most of the Left had ignored the colonial issue, and some outright refused to concede to Morocco's demand

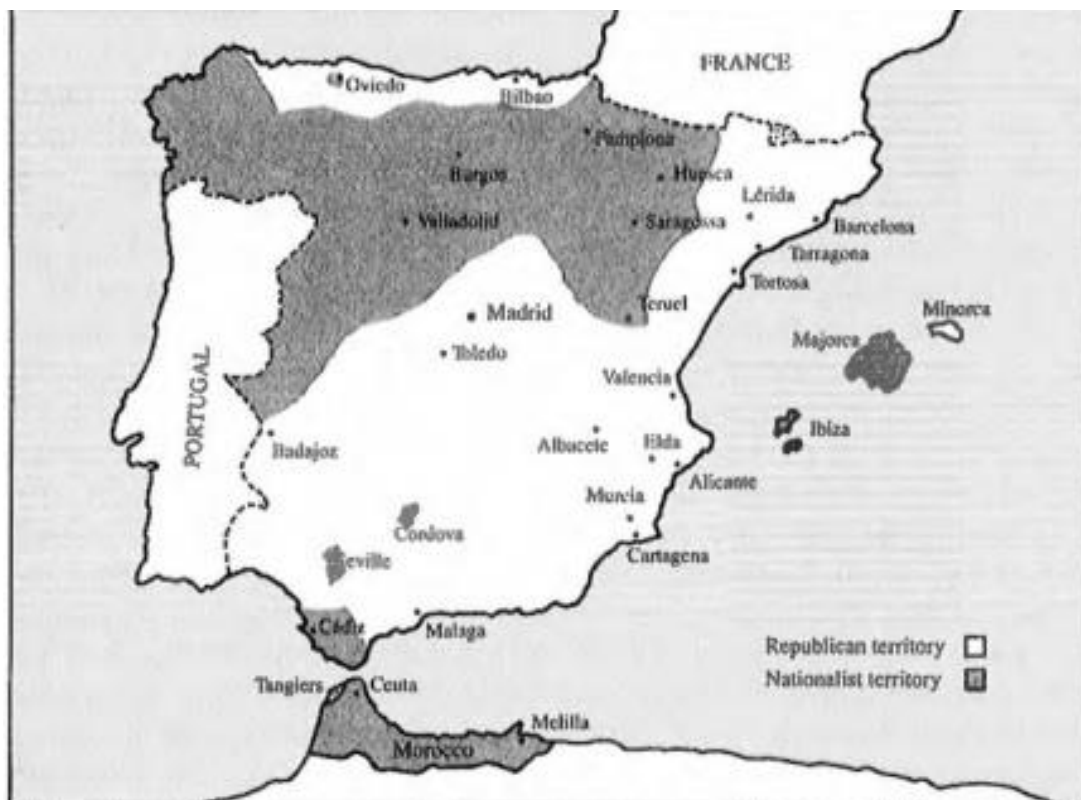
for independence. Because of this, Franco was able to win sympathy from an army which he needed to win the war. Morocco fell under Nationalist control.

The next day, planes supplied by Italy and Nazi Germany carried Franco and his men from Morocco to Spain. Here, the coup was only a partial success. Workers declared a general strike and the CNT took the lead in distributing arms. Wherever the workers had weapons and acted quickly, the Nationalists were put down. Where they delayed, or where the government successfully withheld arms from workers (whom capitalists feared more than fascists), the Nationalists established their dictatorship.

Workers didn't just stop at resisting the right-wing coup—they seized the opportunity to start a revolution. Workers established democratic committees to handle the reorganisation of daily life. Defence and justice committees handled security, supply committees handled distribution, and neighbourhood committees allowed workers to coordinate their efforts. All of the left-wing political groups formed workers' militias, often along the lines modelled by the anarchists. In the militias, workers co-operatively managed the war effort. Anarchists refused to be soldiers under the command of officers, instead appointing respected tacticians as delegates.

Discuss

Imagine if workers had been better organised internationally during this period. What could have happened differently?



Division of Spain on July 20, 1936

Workers' Control

The Spanish Revolution is the largest ever example of workers taking over production and managing it themselves. In areas where the workers were strong enough to take advantage of the situation (particularly

Catalonia and Aragon), they turned the fight against the fascists into a revolution. They established an alternative power to the Republican government and took over their workplaces.

At least two million workers and peasants actively participated in managing their industries without bosses or state-planning. They provided for a population of around 6 million in areas where the revolution had made all politicians and employers powerless.

The initials of the workers' organisations—most prominently the CNT-FAI—were painted across the front of collectivised warehouses, factories, and public transport. In anarchist strong-holds like Barcelona, buildings of all kinds draped themselves in the red and black flag.

Work-plans were made in general assemblies of workers, which consulted specialist technicians for advice. Delegates were elected to share information across industries and coordinate economic planning at higher levels.

Every industry was transformed. Tram workers introduced new safety and signalling systems; took on workers who had been fired; ran more trams more often; and had showers and sanitation areas installed in their work sheds for the first time. Entire routes were rebuilt in

the interests of drivers and passengers, rather than profit.

Hotels, churches, and other properties of the capitalists were turned into communal dining halls, schools, warehouses, political headquarters for revolutionary committees, and free medical centres. In Barcelona alone, six new hospitals were constructed, along with dozens of smaller clinics. Specialist doctors could be seen by workers, and not just the rich. Women's healthcare was greatly expanded, with gynaecological treatment becoming widely available for the first time.

In industries like woodworking, construction, and chemical production, inefficient competition among dozens of small companies was eliminated. Instead, workers came together in large, comfortable workshops, which they designed and decorated themselves. This allowed the workers to make more decisions together, pool their resources, and put them in service of the revolution.

The revolution went the furthest in the countryside, where hundreds of towns were fully collectivised. Some immediately got to work building communism: abolishing all forms of money and individual reward for labour.

Each household could freely access necessary goods like bread, while non-essential goods were fairly

rationed. When towns suffered from a limited supply of essential goods, they were distributed on the basis of a family's needs.

Discuss

Why should we argue for communism and not just workplace democracy?

Tensions Within the CNT

The workers who took over their workplaces put anarchist communism into action. The people at the forefront of the revolution were rank-and-file members of the CNT.

The CNT leadership, however, was starting to work against their own members. Influential CNT leaders pointed out that while the Nationalists were being armed by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, the anti-fascists had limited supplies and no international support. The French and British were blocking arms, and Stalin refused to provide aid to any government which ignored his policy demands. The CNT leaders concluded that the revolution had to be less radical, so that capitalist governments would support the anti-fascist war.

The CNT leadership was also worried about being isolated from other groups on the Left. They pointed out that none of the Marxist or reformist parties were joining them in arguing that the war should be turned into a revolution. They took this as proof that the anarchists were alone.

At the same time, tens of thousands of workers affiliated with these Marxist and reformist parties were ignoring their leadership and following the lead of their anarchist co-workers.

Discuss

Should anarchists ever attempt to work with Marxists or reformists? If so, when? If not, why not?

Collaboration with the State

In September 1936, Largo Caballero (*kah-bah-YEH-roh*) was appointed as Prime Minister. Caballero was broadly respected across the working class and represented the Marxist left-wing of the Socialist Party. He was desperate to get the anarchists under control, reassert the power of the state, and reverse the revolution in the economy. The CNT leadership was increasingly sympathetic to this, but still unsure of what to do.

The Republicans and Socialists demanded that the anarchists put aside their principles and join an anti-fascist government. Particular pressure was placed on the CNT in Catalonia, where self-managed industries were threatened with losing funding (banks and gold reserves were in the hands of the government), and anarchist militias were told that they would be denied war supplies.

Regional and national delegates of the CNT quickly met for emergency conferences, where they made the decision to help rebuild the state. The delegates granted leading CNT officials permission to accept ministerial portfolios in the government. The processes followed in making these decisions marked a serious breach with the CNT's espoused principles and usual procedures. Rank-and-file members weren't given the proper consultation or power of ratification which had been routine up to that point.

Participation in government was announced as a done deal, which members simply had to accept. Some members weren't concerned, because the CNT was open to all workers, rather than just anarchist ones. Others were conflicted, but chose to focus on self-management and the war effort. Most committed anarchists were shocked.

A few things prevented these principled anarchists challenging their leadership. First of all, many of the

most militant anarchists were busy on the frontlines and feared making internal divisions even worse. The government had also cleverly offered ministerial positions to influential FAI members, so that the 'guardian of anarchist purism' would be implicated in collaboration. This helped compromise the FAI as a vehicle for disaffected anarchists to organise around. Finally, the CNT leadership gradually bureaucratized their positions, and relied on an influx of newer, more conservative members to maintain their position.

By joining a government, the CNT made the ultimate concession, but the false promises of collaboration never came to anything. Moderating the revolution never led to aid from France, Britain, or any of the other liberal democracies. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union (which had flooded Spain with military advisors and secret police) continued to condition its limited support on the promotion of anti-revolutionary and pro-Stalin politicians.

Discuss

If an anarchist organisation breaks with its decision-making procedures, how should we react?

Splits in the CNT

Opposition to government collaboration gradually built over the following months. Anarchist militias on the front-

line opposed being turned into regular soldiers in a state's army. They were in disbelief at news of attempts to disempower workers at home. They began to argue that the fight against fascism required taking control of the entire economy and forcing a final confrontation with the state.

As the government regained its strength, it began making moves to get rid of workers' control. Collectives were violently attacked by Stalinist soldiers, and economic control handed to either the government or the former bosses.

The anarchist feminist organisation *Mujeres Libres* (*moo-HEH-rehs LEEB-rehs*; Free Women of Spain) criticised the backsliding of rights for women. Women had been forced out of the armed struggle by the Republican government and continued to face internal sexism within the movement.

Workers started to criticise the concessions made to appease the capitalist governments of the world, like leaving foreign-owned businesses untouched. They also expressed regret at not having taken control of the country's gold reserves, and for having shown too much tolerance for small business owners. These capitalists had since joined the Communist Party in droves. Stalin had ordered that the Party adopt a conservative platform

which would appeal to small business owners. Property owners came to see the Communist Party as the only way to reassert state power and protect their class interests.

Faced with this situation, the anarchists who opposed government collaboration saw the need for a new anarchist political organisation. This led to the creation of the Friends of Durruti Group, named after the famous and uncompromising militia leader, Buenaventura Durruti. The Friends of Durruti's programme called for an end to government collaboration, the forceful overthrow of the state, full socialisation of production, and for revolutionary power to be held by a federated system of workers committees. These efforts would be coordinated by delegates to a revolutionary council or *junta* (*HOON-tah*).

The demands of the Friends of Durruti were supported by the Barcelona section of the FAI and Mujeres Libres. Meanwhile, a left-wing faction of the Marxist (but anti-Stalinist) POUM were beginning to make similar arguments. They used language taken from Marxist theory, but their interpretation of a 'workers' and peasants' government' was very close to anarchism. This was made clear when the left-wingers of the POUM ultimately found themselves fighting side-by-side with the Friends of Durruti, Barcelona FAI, Mujeres Libres,

and other rank-and-file members of the CNT during this period.

Discuss

Why do you think Stalin took the position of adopting a conservative platform?

The Moment of Truth: ‘The May Days’

On May 3, 1937, security forces controlled by the Catalan Communist Party attacked the central telephone exchange in Barcelona. This was an attempt to break the power of the CNT and take control of a key strategic building in the city.

CNT defence committees sprang into action, and a city-wide general strike was quickly declared. Over 7000 revolutionaries—mostly anarchists, but some POUM—took up arms and built barricades. The defence committees weren’t just fighting for a telephone exchange; they believed that this could be the moment to make the final push for revolution. They drew up plans for an assault on the Catalan government, with the aim of abolishing it once and for all.

The anarchist ministers were furious about the government’s attack on the telephone exchange. The

CNT leadership still refused to side with the calls for a new revolution. They denounced the Friends of Durruti and called for calm while they negotiated within the government.

The central government in Madrid gave the local government in Catalonia a choice: put down the revolutionary uprising, or face military rule by the army, and potentially even the bombing of Barcelona. Despite the widespread sympathy with the uprising, workers continued to defer to the famous leaders of the CNT. Members respected these figureheads and had developed a strong sense of discipline regarding the official policies of the organisation. They waited for a call to carry out a second revolution but never received one.

The organised anti-collaborationists, like the Friends of Durruti, were more willing to act against the leadership, but still waited for approval from the regional council of the defence committees. What they didn't realise was that the leadership had become aware of this. Behind the scenes, the council was quickly stacked by the leadership with collaborationist members to stall its decision making.

Over the following days, the body count mounted. Calls for a cease-fire blared out of loudspeakers from celebrated icons of the CNT. The central government in Madrid began its efforts to take control of the region.

The morale and energy on the barricades quickly drifted away. People went home. Workers, motivated by an urgent need to supply the war effort, returned to their jobs. The moment had passed.

Discuss

How can we prevent rank and file members of a mass organisation from simply deferring to its leadership?

Defeat

The rest of the Spanish Civil War is a story of counter-revolution. Having helped rebuild the state, the anarchist ministers were soon forced out, with nothing to show for it. The POUM, lacking the strength of the anarchist movement, was quickly criminalised and slandered as a 'fascist' organisation—a test case later applied to the anarchists.

Workers' control was slowly crushed. On the frontline, arms were withheld from militias until they joined the regular army. Those who resisted were imprisoned and tortured for 'sabotaging the war effort'. Others were simply executed. By 1939, the jail cells and graveyards were full of revolutionaries.

The Republic had become a Stalinist state, but even this highly centralised government couldn't achieve the one benefit it claimed to offer: victory against the fascists. The counter-revolution had disrupted efficient collectivised production. The best soldiers had been imprisoned or killed. Morale among the workers was destroyed. The Nationalists quickly got the upper hand, and in 1939 Franco declared victory. Anarchism in Europe was effectively wiped out. The World War that followed would be waged between fascists, the capitalist empires, and Stalin's dictatorship.

Discuss

What can this final period of the Civil War teach us about anti-fascist organising today?

Lessons

Like the Russian Revolution, Spain offers tragic lessons about what *not* to do if we find ourselves in a revolutionary situation. The sabotage of the Revolution by liberals and Stalinists shows that we can't rely on either class enemy. The policy of 'putting off the revolution' to 'win the war first' had disastrous consequences. This should make it clear to anarchists that we can't afford to abandon our principles.

The Bolsheviks in Russia owe a lot of their failure to the fact that they implemented their Leninist programme. The anarchists in Spain, on the other hand, allowed themselves to be destroyed precisely because they *didn't* act like anarchists. Just as anarchist theory predicted, the anarchist ministers were transformed by their position in the state. Some of Spain's best anarchists found themselves siding with the police over the CNT members who took to the streets in May 1937. Meanwhile, CNT members changed too, as they learned to defer to their leaders in government.

Spain also shows why we need to be revolutionary internationalists. Capitalist governments will never support a real revolution. The real internationalists in Spain weren't the Ministers begging for foreign aid from governments, but the CNT members who argued that Spanish workers should support rebels in Morocco and extend the revolution into France. Outside of Spain, workers knew they couldn't wait for their governments to act. Instead, they signed up to be fighters in the International Brigades.

The failure of the Spanish Revolution also points to some weaknesses in the strategy of **anarcho-syndicalism**. Anarcho-syndicalists make the mistake of seeing trade unions as sufficient for revolution. For anarcho-syndicalists, the union itself should be an

anarchist organisation, and explicitly committed to anarchist politics.

However, any effective union, including the CNT, ultimately functions as a grouping of workers on the basis of class, because these unions don't turn away non-anarchists. An 'anarcho-syndicalist union' can actually be radically divided over what the tactics and goals of the organisation should be. Even if it has an anarchist structure, the union can easily turn into an organisation which acts contrary to anarchist principles.

Despite this, the union would likely retain the loyalty of those members who see it as central to the anarchist movement. The CNT leaders successfully condemned the Friends of Durruti as being 'anti-anarchist' because to many members the CNT *was* anarchism—whether its leadership joined the government or not.

In the anarchist movement, the main alternative to anarcho-syndicalism is the approach known as **organisational dualism**. This strategy argues that we should organise amongst ourselves as anarchists, in independent and specifically anarchist organisations. Such organisations make it possible to develop a common strategy which consistently pushes the struggle forward. It allows anarchists to adapt to whatever new conditions the class struggle creates, with a clear political position.

At the same time, organisational dualism argues that we should involve ourselves in mass organisations of struggle which unite workers on the basis of class. By doing this, we avoid the problem of separating more radical workers from less radical ones. Marxist and republican workers acted like anarchists when they found themselves side-by-side in struggle, and we should see this as a good thing.

The FAI was, to an extent, an attempt to grapple with this reality, but the FAI wasn't an ideologically coherent or formally structured organisation. The FAI lacked clearly defined membership or a shared political programme. It was a loose federation of affinity groups, open to any activist who identified as 'anarchist'. This structure proved inadequate to the task. New organisations—like the Friends of Durruti—were necessary to meet the moment, but these proved too little too late.

The workers and peasants of Spain demonstrated that it's possible for us to run our own lives, without bosses or governments. It's up to us to win that fight once and for all.

Discuss

What do you think of the merits of organisational dualism compared to anarcho-syndicalism?