

Letters

Various Authors

Prison Food

Greetings!

Me, and some good comrades are being held prisoner in this pigsty called prison, and we came upon a copy of the *April Fifth Estate*. Needless to say, we are always trying to Fuck Authority, but there are no RICH around here to EAT, so we ate your newspaper, and that fucker sure was good food for thought.

If it's possible, could you add my name to your list of subscribers so we could grow and share this new food. I personally thought at one time that *The Match* was good, but now I've been regurgitating F. Woodworth's sourness into the shit bowl...

Yours for Anarchy,
Jamie Barnes,
Coordinator to the Auburn Prison Collective
Auburn, New York

The Role of Unions

Comrades:

Enclosed find one dollar as per your appeal for emergency funds.

I enjoy the paper very much even though I disagree with some of the ideas expressed therein. In particular is the inability, or unwillingness, on the part of some writers, in particular one John Zerzan, to distinguish between unionism and trade union bureaucrats. In attempting to bolster his anti-union position, he dishonestly selects only facts that support his position. Furthermore, he shows a complete ignorance of the labor movement in this country.

In his article debunking the fact that unionism, and unions, caused wage increases, he fails to mention that, on the average, unionized workers earn \$2,800 more a year than non-union workers. He also tries to support his position that Ford introduced his famous \$5-a-day wage at a point when unionism was weak. Did it ever occur to Zerzan that Ford may have offered such a generous wage in order to keep the unions (specifically the IWW, which was organizing in the auto industry at the time) out of the industry?

It is not unusual for employers to offer concessions (i.e., bribes) to their employees during organizing drives for this purpose.

The anti-unionists' position falters when they are forced to answer a simple question: "If unions are so good for the employers, why do the bosses spend so much money and effort in trying to keep their enterprises non-union?" I have yet to receive a sensible answer to this question. And the historical fact remains that through various strategies involving concessions and violence, and all areas in between, the employers continue to oppose unionism.

Indeed, during the current crisis, the bosses in several areas have launched a drive to bust the unions. Mass firings, scab-hiring, injunctions and police violence are part of this union-busting campaign. The trade-union bosses hope to save themselves (and their jobs) by kissing up to the employers and their government. They help to break a strike here; accept a wage cut there; and in all manners, try to stifle whatever vestiges of unionism that remain on the job.

In the face of this offensive of the boss class, it is the job of revolutionaries to promote direct organization and direct action on the job. This is unionism and has nothing in Common with the trade union bureaucracies. Call it what you will, but for-me revolutionary industrial unionism will suffice.

Yours for the Works,
Mike Hargis
Chicago

Zerzan replies: M.H.'s letter is so misinformed and archaically reformist that I scarcely know where to begin. Time passes and some of us learn a little and some of us remain idiots.

The Wobblies (IWW) spend their time trying to regularize production and boost productivity by organizing hippies at doughnut shops and tourist traps. Meeting resistance to their pathetic, if well-intentioned plans for One Big Union, they conclude (aided by sundry leftist slogans) that capitalism is antiunion.

The tiny speck of inverted truth present in their "analysis" is that small, new marginal business is quite often anti-union. But what the dullest business major could point out to them is that large, established important enterprises have largely come long ago to appreciate the great benefit of a predictable, relatively docile "workforce" conferred by unionization.

Relevant here is the fact that as Huw Beynon's book on Ford points out, no recognized union has ever been dislodged. The company collects its dues for it; it has a monopoly of membership and all is basically stable and cozy.

As for Ford granting the \$5 day out of IWW pressure, this is sheer fantasy. Ford, with sole control of his operations, was an unrepresentative eccentric; his resistance to unionism was not shared by his colleagues for long, and *Fortune* magazine ridiculed him for it increasingly, in its role as mouthpiece of big capital.

As for a \$2800 wage differential between union and non-union workers, the figure is a bit contrived. The average difference is about 10%, with the basic reason for the gap the fact that some industries are more prosperous than others (with the same fraction historically going to wages at any given point) (See my article, June 1976 FE). Put another way, workers in poorer sectors (e.g. textiles, agriculture) are paid very poorly, union or not.

Today, unionization is slowly spreading, having in the '30s covered the pivotal industries, such as steel, auto, rubber. Unions are increasingly large holders of capital; they lend and borrow—frequently from the very industries with which they bargain; they conduct strike rituals, intended to drain off the built-up tension and hostility of their captive memberships. They struggle to contain absenteeism, turnover, sabotage, low productivity and growing anti-unionism, which has not abated a whit, "recession" or not.

Their bourgeois role is critical now, not forgetting that their very existence is predicated on the continued existence of wage labor, as it was since their birth and promotion as a weapon against the Luddites. Ludicrous notions of "union-busting," "scab-herding" (?), etc. do not hide in any way the obvious nature of unions as the owners' bodyguards, as perhaps the last sinews of a system in deepening crisis.

Democratized, reformed unions, such as our correspondent strives for, will be the last stage of containment. "Revolutionary unionism" is thus a very backward joke.

Pamphlet Out

Dear FE Folks,

Our pamphlet *Class Struggles in China* has been printed and is now ready for distribution. It is an eighty-page, critical historical summary of social trends in China from a revolutionary perspective. It contains concrete and specific criticism of the Maoist regime and the world it has created and information on the revolutionary opposition it has encountered.

Although we put in most of the labor ourselves, at Come!Unity Press, printing supplies and use of machinery have added up to \$500.00. As of now, we have received \$145 in contributions leaving us with a printing debt of \$355.00. Because of this, we hope to receive at least 50 cents for each copy, which should also take care of mailing costs.

Anyone interested in receiving copies of our pamphlet should write to: Charlatan Stew, 264 Bowery, New York City 10012.

Yours for a New World,
Sylvie and Robby
New York City

Spain Response I

To the Fifth Estate:

Unfortunately, the article “Self-Management and the Spanish Revolution” (July 1976), while containing some valid points, flounders because it is trying to fit the actual experience in Spain into the programme of a small sect unrepresented in that, or any other, struggle. The Anarchist movement in Spain can certainly be criticized, but the criticisms given in your article are unreal.

The Spanish proletariat did not “rediscover” the councilist theory which the authors are trying to make their own. The basis of the Spanish workers’ movement was the local trades council, or commune, dating back long before Kronstadt, Germany, Italy and so on, even pre-dating the Paris Commune. The CNT was built upon what they called the “federalist” principle and united the locals—the “hierarchical structure” was unknown, it was “horizontal as opposed to vertical unionism.” There is no way of conceiving “horizontal unions” other than as workers’ councils.

The FAI had many faults in organization, but to describe it as “quasi-Leninist” is absurd. To be Leninist would imply having a party structure over and above the proletariat drawn from the professional revolutionaries who in turn came from the middle classes. This in no way applied to the FAI, which was a union of affinity groups and whose most noticeable activity, other than propaganda, was to provide the militant resistance as a rear-guard defense (not a vanguard) for the workers. This role was later taken over by the defense committees (see Sabate), FIJJL and the International Revolutionary Solidarity Movement (see book of that title by A. Meltzer).

Compromises in 1936–1939 (pre- and post-civil war) is ignored, are ascribed to the “bureaucracy” of the anarchist movement. This is purely a Trotskyist analysis (taken from Felix Morrow) not based on reality (little of Morrow is). No bureaucracy existed. The whole of the CNT (pre-1936) was run by one paid secretary, to which were sometimes added a couple of office staff, sometimes not.

The “bureaucracy” is the Trotskyist alibi for what went wrong in Russia when after the revolution the vast civil service of the Tsar became a vast “Red” civil service on which all was blamed: Trotsky could never bear to admit Bolshevism itself went wrong. In other countries, the social democratic or trade-union leadership might be responsible for betrayals, “bureaucracy” was blamed, but it seldom was the bureaucracy which made the decisions, but the leadership. This situation did not exist in Spain.

To fit their thesis the authors adopt the line that what went wrong was due to “the Anarchists”, what went right was “the workers”. However, in 1936 when the workers rushed to take control—not just “manage”—industry and also rushed to the barricades to fight the fascists, there began a drift of former militants into the government (not the union) bureaucracy and administration. They were not nominated by the unions, they were selected by the government. The curse was the personality cult (not the formation of a bureaucracy), as “well-known names”, “distinguished figures” and “old libertarians” were appointed, not because of their representing anyone, but because it was assumed that their names in the government would mean something to the workers and, unfortunately, this was the case. Gradually they assumed leadership and spoke as leaders; and inevitably their leadership was towards compromise. After the civil war they formed a static leadership in Toulouse and the resistance from the clandestine CNT in Spain resumed without benefit of the “great names”.

To say the “Anarchists” were tactically outflanked by the Fascists who called their rebellion first before “the anarchists” could call theirs is the height of naivety, which, in order to make credible, one has to invent an anarchist

bureaucracy and “quasi” Leninist party. Had the Anarchists been in a position to “call” the tune, they would not have gone into military resistance in July; They would have let Franco walk in and then called the resistance; alternatively, they would have declared independence for Catalonia and Valencia, concentrated on taking their stronghold in Saragoza, and let the rest of Spain fight under its own government, perhaps in alliance. But the workers would never have agreed to this in the climate of 1936, and any talk of Spain at that time must be about what the workers did do.

Stuart Christie
Scotland

Spain Response II

Dear FE:

My primary disagreements with your article, “Self-Management and the Spanish Revolution,” (FE, July 1976) center on the author’s treatment of the operations of the CNT. First, whether ideas came from the district, regional or national levels, final approval had to come from the locals, or Sindicatos Unicos as they were known in Spain. Even the decision to join the government (made at a regional conference) was approved by the locals. The author claims that the councils did not demonstrate direct democracy, but I believe that this shows they did.

Secondly, the author’s criticism of the CNT’s lack of a nationwide movement is incomplete. The CNT was not the only union in Spain and, in fact, the Socialist UGT and the CNT maintained a strong rivalry for years before the war. Many rallied to the UGT for the reason that the Socialist leadership offered a milder reform than the Anarcho-syndicalists. Yet the CNT never forced its membership on the workers and peasants. Both Burnett Belloten’s *The Grand Camouflage* and Sam Dolgoff’s *The Anarchist Collectives* give numerous examples of how the CNT united with the UGT in some collectives or else allowed “individualists” to work with them.

More importantly than debating historical incongruities are some of the overall points inherent in the Spanish Revolution. The author’s remarks of anarchist inconsistency in joining the government is well taken. The effort to unify the left was foremost in the minds of the CNT-FAI hierarchy in addition to gaining access to much needed arms and supplies for their militias. So much so that Durruti’s famous phrase, “We renounce all except victory,” became the recognition that the anarchists should put their first effort into the war, and when victorious, their second effort into the Revolution.

In addition, the Republican-Socialist-Stalinist-Anarchist government tried to a futile effort to coax western democracies into supplying them with aid.

In addition, I see an obvious connection between the idea which says you guide a revolution by the wisdom of a few (a la Bakunin), and the subsequent actions taken by the CNT (once in the government) which countered the revolutionary potential/desires of their rank and file. On this the author claims that the councils should “take the offensive and establish their authority everywhere.” As previously stated, the CNT’s nature was not to exert their “authority” or else they would have demanded total cooperation from workers and peasants in their collectives. Instead, the CNT rank and file was primarily concerned with trying to defend their workplaces.

Yours for a better World,
Jess Gordon
St. Paul MN

Staffresponse: Although the most thoroughgoing criticism of the CNT-FAI can be found in *The Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* by Vernon Richards, you fairly well sum up his points by your phrase “the CNT-FAI hierarchy.”

Also, the quote you attribute to anarchist leader Durruti is probably spurious. In *Durruti: The People Armed* by Abel Paz, the author exposes as Stalinist fabrications a number of alleged Durruti statements published in *Pravda* after his death in 1936, which echoed the CP line of defending the Spanish bourgeois Republic at the expense of the Revolution.

The Revolution and the fight to defeat fascism were separate only with those who betrayed both.

Be Careful

Dear Fifth Estate,

Stress and cancer are caused by radioactivity from high voltage in TV, cars, radar, roentgen, luminous-tubes and so on. Lung-cancer is caused by radioactive damp from beton, cement and plaster. Houses made of these materials requires very good ventilation. Skin-cancer is caused by mineral-oil on skin. Technicians should wash their hands often.

Heart-attacks is caused by sulphur in drinking water. This acid should be neutralized by eating less Coca-Cola, sugar, alcohol and meat, and more milk, vegetables grown without chemicals, and some herbs.

The Mafia controls ordinary medical research, and protects industry by giving out wrong information. This kind of research is good for nothing, but employment by its huge money-circulation.

The Mafia have tried to kill me because of this information.

Richard Hagen

Norway

Mexican Plea

Dear People:

On behalf of the 600 Americans incarcerated in Mexico, I am writing you today in the hopes that you can communicate our plight and intention to your readers:

Upon arrest in Mexico, foreigners are subject to many abuses. These include electroshock torture and beatings to obtain forced confessions, denial to legal counsel or embassy representatives, being held incommunicado, and sentences of 7 to 15 years for first offense drug violations.

In 1975, a U.S. Congressional subcommittee conducted an investigation into our allegations and substantiated our charges. Secretary of State Kissenger came to Mexico City to speak personally with President Luis Echeverria on June 11, 1976, to try and seek a solution to the continuing mistreatment Americans receive at the hands of Mexican authorities.

No relief has been forthcoming. We are still the victims of violated rights under the United Nations, the constitution of Mexico and the International Red Cross.

Because the situation has become insupportable and intolerable, the 600 Americans in prison in Mexico, joined by many other foreigners incarcerated here, will commence a massive hunger strike on September 7, 1976. We urge your support. We need your help.

We ask you to send a telegram or night letter to Secretary of State Kissenger and/ or President Luis Echeverria of Mexico urging an amnesty for all Americans and other foreigners currently suffering in Mexican prisons. Thank you

Robyn Everman

Carcel de Mujeres

Calle Ixtapalapa

Santa Marta, Mexico, D.F.

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/276-september-1976/letters>
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