

The CNT in Modern Spain

The Weight of the Dead and Dead Weight

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Note: The following article was translated from the readers' soapbox page of the June 1, 1978 issue of *Solidaridad Obrera* (C/. Princesa, 56, entlo, 1a, Barcelona, Spain), organ of the C.N.T. of Catalonia.

Since last May, *Solidaridad Obrera* seems to have gone through quite a change in its content and has found itself in conflict with the C.N.T. nationally. In a recent issue of the bulletin *Echanges* (no. 16, July 1978), they state: "...this is an official paper of the C.N.T. it appears that the editorial staff of this paper has undergone changes incorporating elements who do not support any union including the C.N.T. It remains to be seen how long they will keep the editorship of the paper, for it is clear now that the C.N.T. nationally (headquarters Madrid) is pursuing a more and more strictly syndicalist line, expelling or criticising sections or groups considered to be 'assemblyist' i.e. for the power of the mass meeting."

It was raining in the Paseo de la Castellana (Madrid) when I came upon the "Unitary" U.G.T./CC.OO. * demonstration just as it was breaking up. Covered with stickers and bedraggled red flags, men and women were scattering down the streets trying to give their faces that expression of happy resolution found in Soviet and Falangist posters.

Surveying the sadness of those scenes, I told myself, once again, that Mayday is the perfect symbol of the death of the worker's movement as expressed traditionally in parties and unions. The fact that this Mayday procession was authorized for the first time since 1939 doesn't change anything, and neither does the fact that the C.N.T. ** demonstrated separately.

For what is Mayday if not a burial? A decades-old burial repeated infinitely to commemorate the Chicago dead, and every May 1st almost everywhere in the world processions go through the streets behind the absent corpses of American workers murdered by the police, just as on fixed dates other processions pass along different or even the same streets to pay homage to Virgin What's-her-face or to Saint Doohickey. This means, simply enough, that the defunct "worker's movement" imitates the values, taboos, and superstitions of the society that it claims (or used to claim) to be destroying or transforming.

At issue is not only the cult of the dead, of martyrs, saints and heros, but many other important things. Some have already warned us of everything that rallies borrowed from Catholic mass, but going beyond and deeper we find that the "worker's" parties and "worker's" unions have practical-theoretical fabric and formulas patterned after capitalist ones. Discipline, sacrifice, efficiency, profitability, compromise, self-denial, work, etc. are the virtues of the one and of the other, because one and the other are the same thing. The struggling of the unions and parties, when it is real and not mere show for the "masses" benefit, can be summed up as a struggling for Power. Who dominates whom? That is the question. On the other hand, who does something that really leads to the abolition of domination, something that oversteps the eternal division between leaders and led?... no one. This is the essential factor behind the similarity—despite conflicts and contradictions—between the "worker's movement" and the modern capitalist society that has definitively "digested" that worker's movement.

The C.N.T. as it has carried on since its “reconstruction” (and even before) plays a specific, but not different role. With a separate May Day demonstration the C.N.T. brought many potential abstainers out of the woodwork to participate trustingly in the funeral ritual. This is only one example, but it is nonetheless true that the most important current work of the C.N.T. is precisely that of attempting to get rebels and those on the fringes of society into groups, to incorporate them, in order that they participate (in their own way) in the great political-social comedy of “demanding things” and being the “opposition.” If the C.N.T. didn’t present itself as “different,” there would be no such effect because rebels and those on the fringes wouldn’t pay any attention to it.

A second example: In many cases strikes are not organized for the “workers’ benefit,” but for the unions benefit. Many of the latest strikes haven’t consisted of more than “military maneuvers” attempting to demonstrate the strength of the unions, building up some unions at the expense of others. Something like this has happened, I believe, in the April printing industry strike in Catalonia, where once the maneuvers were finished the order was given to go back to the barracks without having obtained the most miniscule of demands...confuse demands, by the way, although that is not the point here.

The present-day C.N.T. consists of a jumbled hodgepodge, from nostalgic pistol buffs to ecologicistic pacifists, running through the syndicalists, anarchists, assemblyists *** and other anti-authoritarians. The diversity obscures and at times hinders the C.N.T.’s positive social function for the system, but such diversity, aside from being short-lived, has taken in many people who thought they saw in the jumble an opening, a possibility of doing something in a less disciplined and bureaucratic way: sheer deception.

After 40 years of Franco it was logical that “democratic illusions” would be strong (though lately boredom among militants has been spreading as fast as leukemia). One might suppose that several unions battling it out are worth more than a single union monopolizing the “worker representation,” but all that doesn’t diminish the fact that the function of unions in modern industrial society is to integrate workers into the production process and into the ritualistic and alienating spectacle of the “opposition.” Despite its differences and internal tangles, the C.N.T. remains a union. Something new will have to be invented to break out of the perennial pattern of more and more bureaucracy each new time around.

* The U.G.T. is the Socialist Party-controlled union, while the CC.OO. (workers commissions) is the Communist Party-controlled union.

** The C.N.T. is the anarcho-syndicalist union.

*** The assemblyists is a labor movement tendency that believes that all decisions should be made by local worker assemblies without union or party interference.



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