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Barricades in Barcelona

The first revolt of the proletariat against the bosses’ Popular Front [1]


Under the Iron Heel of Spanish Democracy

The armed uprising of 3-7 May in Catalonia against the Generality, the boss class state, by the working class, cannot be understood, nor properly explained without hard study of the events that led to this unorganized effort to capture power. For nearly six years before this struggle, the ‘Republic of workers of all classes’, established after the overthrow of King Alfonso, attempted vainly to solve the contradictions of Spanish economic life, caught within the web of the chief European imperialists, who were making ready for the redivision of the earth through a second world war. The bourgeois republic proved its utter bankruptcy, revealed the impotence of capitalist democracy in the age of decay of the system. It was unable to solve any of the problems arising from the carryovers of feudalism, nor could it consolidate its victories as ‘executive committee’ of the exploiters, in Marx’s phrase. These six years marked a period of relentless class struggle between the workers and the bosses with their Socialist and Stalinist servants.

Once more, capitalism displayed itself as the greatest barrier in the road of human evolution. And again, the ‘democratic’ capitalists were trapped between the menace (to them) of proletarian revolution and fascism; both ways led to civil war.

At every ebb and flow of this six years strife, from the Asturian rebellion (1934) to the Popular Front electoral triumph (February 1936) and the July attack of the Fascist generals, the struggle disclosed the fundamental international pattern of imperialism interwoven with the civil war of classes in Spain.

The July Outbreak

By July 1936 all objective factors were ripe for proletarian revolution. All the subjective
requirements for working class success were present except one – the absolutely necessary party of revolutionary Marxism. Without the capable class leadership of a party that could interpret the events preceding July and guide the militant masses, the proletariat of Spain lost precious ground and time. The workers being vanguardless, the forces of reaction took the offensive, not against the puny ‘republican’ boss class, but against the danger of labor’s revolt, which the Popular Front regime had not the strength to restrain and destroy.

The Fascist assault in July was an offensive to prevent the inevitable proletarian revolution.

Instead of pursuing an independent class policy, which would convert the poor middle class into an ally, the ‘leaders’ of the proletariat strove to subordinate the workers to the exploiters by means of the Popular Front, with a policy of class peace. The masses defended themselves against the Fascists; despite the cowardice and sabotage of the Popular Front and the petty capitalist shopkeepers and farmers, a vigorous counter-offensive was launched against Franco and Mola. In more than three-quarters of Spain the Capitalist-Monarchist-Fascist reaction, representing a part of the bourgeoisie and landowners (including the Catholic Church), were trounced.

Alongside the boss class regime appeared the embryonic government of the working class; the seeds of proletarian councils (soviets, juntas) were the Anti-Fascist Militia Committees of Catalanian labor; similar crude organs of the revolutionary class were created in other sections of Spain, forecasting the workers’ state, the dictatorship of labor.

The Dissolution of Dual Power

In this critical time, when power was almost in the grasp of the proletariat, when the Popular Front government was tottering, the masses found themselves headless, without a revolutionary Marxian party. No labor organization was willing to break free from capitalism by declaring for the establishment of a proletarian army, a federation of factory and farm councils, and the dictatorship of the proletariat in alliance with the poor peasantry. The finance capitalists of France and England rushed to the assistance of the desperate Azaña regime (the prime ministers Casares Quiroga, Giral, and then Caballero could not deal with the crisis). Italy and Germany, anxious to expand their imperialist influence in the Mediterranean, backed Franco with money, men, machinery, defying the Franco-British empires. To the shame of Soviet Russia, the Stalinist administration placed itself at the service of the French and British warlords, parading under the white flag of ‘neutrality’, cutting off from the Spanish workers revolutionary aid.

The Anglo-French bosses had a double axe to grind: first, to block a proletarian revolution, second, to prevent the Italo-German alliance from conquering strongholds in the Western Mediterranean. The parliamentary bourgeoisie (Loyalists) was subservient to the Franco-British-Russian bloc; the Socialist and Stalinist parties (through the Popular Front) followed the middle class leadership and Russia; and the CNT and FAI [2] trailed behind the SP and CP and the POUM [3] became the tail of the CNT.

The Stalinists and Socialists seized the initiative to liquidate the crude developing forms of dual power, thereby serving the exploiting class in Spain proper. In Catalonia, where the class struggle reached a higher level than elsewhere, where the Stalinist-Socialist party of organic unity (PSUC) [4] had no mass influence, the boss class allowed the Syndicalists and the POUM to enter the government, the Generality. The grateful traitors of these groups then took the lead in dissolving the embryonic soviets, the Anti-Fascist Militia Committees.
Despite these defeats of the working class, capitalism turned out to be so rotten, disorganized, weak (historically with both feet in its grave, waiting for the workers to bury it entirely), that the heroic Spanish proletariat was able to continue the class war in the maze of imperialist conflicts and partisan struggles raging in Iberia.

Reaction in Front and Behind

With the dissolution of the budding organs of dual power, with the absence of a revolutionary Marxian party, the boss class never let a day go by without strengthening their supremacy over the downtrodden discontented proletariat and peasantry. Franco, as the agent of the German-Italian bankers, used one method to achieve this. The Valencia and Barcelona governments, as agents of the Anglo-French bourgeoisie, used an entirely different strategy. For fascism and parliamentarism are the right and left arms of one capitalist body. The ‘democratic’ bossdom, through its eager lackeys, the Socialists and Stalinists, took daily steps to suppress systematically the working class and the militant organizations of labor, the CNT-FAI and the POUM, with their indomitable rank and file.

By April 1937 these measures against the workers created alarm and turmoil that culminated in a series of armed clashes between the forces of the reactionary Popular Front, the Civil and Assault Guards, and the PSUC, on one side, and the fighting workers led by the CNT-FAI and POUM. These last organizations failed to explain the fundamental questions of the revolution to the masses; they failed to prepare them for the coming conflict with the bosses’ regimes of Valencia and Barcelona. Worse yet, they brazenly denied the necessity for the violent overthrow of parliamentary capitalism, the Popular Front. They boasted about the triumphs of the workers’ brigades and patrols, the concessions granted to the poor by the crafty capitalist state; they chattered that it was only a matter of consolidating these gains and defeating the reformists, then all would be well. There was no serious thorough analysis of the problems of social revolution; no scientific guidance of our class. In brief they failed to tell the toilers of Spain the following facts:

- That the Valencia and Barcelona governments were bourgeois governments, counter-revolutionary governments;
- That these regimes were under the domination of the French and English imperialists;
- That Soviet Russia and the Third International were agents of the Anglo-French bosses, lackeys of the League of Nations, with their servile Franco-Soviet Pact and Non-Intervention agreements;
- That the entrance of the CNT-FAI and the POUM into the Catalan capitalist government, and the consequent liquidation of the developing dual power was a criminal betrayal of the working class;
- That the independent class action of the proletariat is possible only through the political and organizational freedom and self-action of a revolutionary Marxian organization, standing for the creation of a Fourth (Communist) International;
- That the capitalist state will never disappear by itself, but must be smashed by armed insurrection aiming at the founding of the workers’ dictatorship;
- That toward this end the proletariat must build Workers’, Peasants’, Combatants’ Councils (soviets, juntas), as organs of dual power before the revolution and as the bodies of state power afterward, with an army of their own, a Red Army.

These are some of the basic lessons ignored by the above named organizations; their other
errors are countless. These are the burning questions of the day, requiring daily detailed explanation to the class, through concrete examples from the history of class wars in other countries and in Spain.

The Treason of May Day

There was no celebration of the world holiday of labor on the First of May 1937 in Barcelona. The CNT, the UGT, the PSUC, the POUM, each informed the working class that demonstrations were all called off, and urged that work in the shops should continue – because of war necessity. They flaunted the slogan: War at the front; work in the rear. In the name of military need, of social order, the revolutionary workers of the city were prevented from assembling in the streets in solidarity with the wage-slaves of the world on the day of international protest against the system and the class which oppress them.

The canceling of the united front demonstration of the CNT and UGT, and the total failure of the POUM to prepare its own mass meetings, cannot be understood by taking their official statements at their word. Their May Day proclamations are only shallow excuses. The bosses’ governments of Valencia and Barcelona have suffered crisis after crisis since the July days, because of the terrible contradiction between the proletarian control over certain economic and military aspects of the nation and the bourgeois control over the state. The solution of this paradox can only be the violent overthrow of the capitalist state, which would advance humanity. A temporary way out for the bosses is the overcoming and disarming of the proletariat, possible through the surrender and treason of the workers’ leaders, weakening their resistance to counter-revolution. The last road, the road of reaction, leading to black barbarism, the boss class of Spain clearly took in May. No stumbling-blocks were placed on their path by the chiefs of labor, of the PSUC naturally, and the CNT and POUM. Since the breaking up of the Anti-Fascist Committees, the Spanish bourgeoisie has accelerated its speed down the reactionary road.

The 14 April strike and demonstration of the CNT against the Civil Guard for the murder of one of their comrades, and against the sixth anniversary of the capitalist republic, was followed up a week later with a Stalinist funeral and demonstration for one of their bureaucrats who had been mysteriously murdered. The Stalinist affair was the spearhead of a bourgeois demonstration; it was bigger than the CNT gathering and gave the bosses fresh courage. The next day, a prominent figure of the CNT was killed ...

Armed conflicts broke out between Civil and Assault Guards, the capitalist cops supported by the Esquerra, and PSUC, on one side and the Workers’ Patrols of the CNT and POUM on the other. Such clashes of the classes occurred throughout April. May Day seemed pregnant with menace for the exploiters.

In the Cerdagne region on the French border the Civil Guards tried to oust the CNT from Customs control, but the Anarchist fighters managed to beat the police and lock them up. The Generality sent agents who arranged a rotten compromise, whereby the first check on Customs of the CNT would be double-checked by the Civil Guard. This treaty of peace resulted in a second battle within 24 hours. The soldiers despatched by the Generality to the spot were thrown in jail with the Guards. Skirmishes between the master-class and labor were fought fiercely in some suburbs of Barcelona. Barricades were thrown up by the Workers’ Patrols. Just before May Day these towns were in the firm hands of the workers. For a brief period the Anarchists claimed fulfillment of their dream, ‘libertarian communism’. Only workers with CNT-FAI and POUM cards were allowed in their streets.
At last the Civil Guard struck out in earnest. Over 300 workers were disarmed in Barcelona in a single week. Afoot and in autos the police attacked workers in homes and inns. The government issued a rattling warning on 29 April:

In the face of the abnormal situation of Public Order, the Generality Council cannot continue its work under the pressure, danger, and disorder caused by the existence in several parts of Catalonia of groups that attempt to impose themselves by coercion, imperiling the revolution and the war. The government therefore suspends its meetings and hopes those groups not directly dependent on the Generality Council will withdraw instantly from the streets so as to make possible the rapid elimination of the unrest and alarm that Catalonia is now enduring.

The council added that they had ‘taken all necessary measures for the purpose of assuring strict compliance with its decisions’.

The CNT-FAI and POUM papers said nothing about the armed struggles shaking Catalonia. Like the Generality they made only vague hints about unrest and alarm. The ‘leaders’ of labor capitulated in silence to the law and order of the Generality, too cowardly to explain the struggles to the class and urge solidarity in action with their fighting followers. No party exists in Spain to give these small skirmishes a united centralized strategy, to coordinate them by means of revolutionary Marxism into a powerful upsurge of the class to wipe out the capitalist state.

The CNT evening organ, La Noche, 30 April, carried the Generality announcement quoted above. On its front page was this patriotic appeal: ‘All arms, which are in excess in Catalonia and on the border, are needed at the front.’ The Anarchists supported the suspension of Generality meetings. When the civil war of classes was developing at home they called for the handing over of arms to the Aragon front!

Instead of dissolving the Council in this crisis, as was the case in all previous Generality predicaments, the bossdom simply suspended its meetings. Thus it established its dictatorship stronger than ever, for the powers of the Council passed to the President, its obedient servant. The capitalist state, freed of parliamentary red tape, functioned more freely, swiftly, ruthlessly, fulfilling the demands of the Anglo-French imperialists and their Stalinist lackeys. Without losing time, the government dissolved the People’s Tribunals, the democratic courts, which Andres Nin of the POUM so fondly spoke of as one of the means by which Spain would travel on to socialism. The excuse given by the Generality for abolishing the Tribunals was – the need for greater centralization.

The Popular Front of reaction next prohibited May Day demonstrations in Barcelona, denying the workers the democratic right of assembly. The CNT-FAI and POUM officials humbly submitted to the capitalist command, while the Republicans, Socialists and Stalinists were blowing bugles for the celebration of the sixth anniversary of the bourgeois republic.

The foremost lesson of the Barcelona May Day was without doubt this: the Anarchists and mock-Marxists, the CNT and POUM, were completely unreliable as vanguards of revolutionary labor; in order to resist the counter-revolutionary boss class and restore the lost gains of the proletariat a new party was needed, a party intelligent, armed with Marxian science, courageous, determined to battle to the end for the conquest of power.

The Fatal Third of May
The bloody struggles in Catalonia during the April period up to May Day, between the forces of the republican bourgeoisie and the militant proletariat, came to a head with the insurrection in Barcelona that started on 3 May. As in the July days, the working class paid the penalty for lacking a vanguard, a party equal to the needs of the time, with a policy of proletarian offensive against reaction. The Generality took the initiative and followed up a series of schemed measures against the workers with an armed attempt to capture the Telephone Building and kick out the CNT-UGT Central Committee in possession [7]. The Assault Guards occupied the Plaza Catalonia, where the building was located, and proceeded to carry out their orders. The workers refused to budge and barricaded themselves in the upper part of the structure. The government guards took over the ground floor and had the place surrounded.

This move of the Generality precipitated events that occurred with great speed. At 3.30 p.m. the attempt to take the Telephone Building was made; at 4.30 the first shot was fired in this advance skirmish of the May battles. By 5 o’clock the Anarchist youth headquarters a few blocks below the besieged building was an outpost of armed workers who flocked into the streets to assist their comrades in distress. At 5.15 these workers disarmed two Assault Guards passing by the territory, ignorant of what was going on. In less than one hour the working class were constructing barricades in all corners of its neighborhoods in front of its union offices and political quarters. As fast as the workers came home from the shops, they poured into the highways and took up arms to defend their class against the Generality.

The Ramblas, avenues which in the evening are usually thronged, were deserted. The first clashes between the workers and the government occurred. Among the most active barricade-fighters were left Anarchists, the Friends of Durruti.

At 7 p.m. in the Plaza Lesseps in the Gracia district, workers patrols were depriving Civil and other Generality guards of their arms as they traversed the area. While the heroic workers were gathering their guns, building their barricades, battling against the boss class and its Socialist-Stalinist gangsters, the Regional Committee of the CNT was ‘phoning all unions and offices, pleading with the workers to abandon the streets, to throw down their weapons. The acid test of class war showed how worthless were these ‘leaders’.

On the evening radio programme President Luis Companys spoke. Not about the barricades that bristled all over the embattled city. Not about the bullets flying on almost every street. But about the Popular Front successes on the distant Aragon Front! The politician who spoke next informed the world that all was well in Barcelona, and quiet. When this statesman was talking of the tranquility of the city, a shot rang over the radio, and let the international listeners know that all was not well in Barcelona. This was the answer of the workers to the counter-revolution, to the Stalinists on the other side of the barricades, to the pleading of the CNT officialdom for peace.

All night long, while the lights of the metropolis were out, in the narrow dark streets, the two opposing forces of the boss class and the working class, searched everybody who passed for arms and documents. In the proletarian districts, past the barricades, only those with CNT-FAI and POUM passcards were allowed to move freely. In the capitalist camp only Esquerra, PSUC, and such groups’ passes were recognized. When workers fell into enemy hands, their cards were torn up, they were told to go home, or kept as prisoners.

May the Fourth

When the sun rose the following Tuesday morning, and it was light enough to see who was
being shot at, Barcelona was a battleground with the Generality fighting for its life and the workers fighting for power. Only two papers appeared that morning, the CNT *Soliaridad Obrera* and the POUM *La Batalla*. The Regional Committee of the CNT had as their main headline, ‘The Counter-Revolution and the CNI’, and under it spoke of the insurrection as an ‘affair’ of yesterday, now over. They begged the workers to stay calm, and carried the news of two people being injured in the unpleasant affair. The POUM writers approved the struggle, called for ‘The Revolutionary Workers Front’, and for ‘Committees of Defence of the Revolution’. An editorial urged ‘the permanent mobilization of the laboring class’. The POUM Executive and POUM Youth presented the following demands as solutions for the crisis:

1. Resignation of Rodriguez Salas (Stalinist), Commissioner of Public Order, directly responsible for the provocations of 3 May.
2. Nullification of the Generality Decree dissolving the Workers’ Patrols of the CNT, POUM, etc.
3. Public order to be in the hands of the working class.
4. Revolutionary Workers Front of organizations standing for the triumph over fascism at the front and the victory (?) in the rear.

The Regional Committee of the CNT by their Monday phone calls, by the 4 May issue of their organ, revealed their true, traitor colors. The POUM Executive, although standing to the left of the CNT officialdom, exposed their bankruptcy. The armed uprising was headless, leaderless ... and they magnanimously endorsed it. As for their ‘solution’ it is entirely adaptable to the framework of the capitalist state, of the Generality. Instead of pointing the way to the victory over capitalism, the POUM perpetrated a crime against the revolutionary proletariat of Barcelona.

Whereas the Regional Committee of the CNT, with its representatives holding seats in the Generality, tried to frustrate the forward movement of the class, the local FAI committees of Barcelona opposed their instructions and called on the barricade defenders to carry on the fight. The Generality, the PSUC counter-revolutionists, the CNT bureaucrats became terrified. A new provisional government was formed and proclaimed, to no avail. It was the same old rotten government of the boss class, with one more shift to the right and reaction, a few different individuals representing the same organizations: an Esquerra member, a Peasant Society delegate (dominated by the Esquerra), one UGT and one CNT man. Antonio Sese, General Secretary of the UGT, and influential Stalinist, was killed before he could sit at the first session of the new government; another counter-revolutionary took his place.

All day long the firing from the two camps continued. The Government Palace of the Generality witnessed the most important, the intensest battle. On three sides the rebellious workers surrounded it: but at night it was still in Generality possession. At the Hotel Colon, on the northwest side of the Plaza Catalonia, the Stalinists (many of whom had returned from the front to become policemen) were unable to protect themselves against the workers’ deadly fire. A large number of Assault Guards arrived to reinforce their weakening ranks. At 6 o’clock the rattle of rifles, pistols, and machine-guns was dulled by 13 thundering reports from a small cannon the proletarians had captured, after blasting their way into a Civil Guard barracks.

On Tuesday the workers endeavored to organize a Central Committee, a revolutionary junta of the barricades, but it failed to materialize. The organizations concerned not only did not take initiative to form such a council; they were sternly against it. The Left militants of the CNT-FAI and the POUM did everything possible to carry their great idea out, but in vain.

After the CNT Regional Committee committed the above-described acts of treason to the workers, Nin and Selana, of the POUM and its youth league, went to the CNT traitors and
asked for a ‘revolutionary united front’, presumably to seize power – within the framework of the capitalist state, of course. Naturally the CNT chiefs declined. Having done their ‘duty’, the POUM spokesman retired! When the proletariat was on the barricades, and the treachery of its Anarchist leaders was apparent even to the blind, these ‘Marxist’ leaders appealed for united action with the wreckers of the class struggle! And united action for winning the capitalist government, not for breaking it to pieces, and building on the ruins the iron dictatorship of labor in alliance with the poor peasants!!

With darkness most of the shooting stopped, though infrequent sniping went on through the night. The radio conveyed to the people the chorus of Generality ‘hot-air artists’ and even CNT voices, informing Barcelona that the day’s ‘affair’ was over, and that all peaceful people should leave the streets and go home.

**May the Fifth**

Wednesday morning the *Solidaridad Obrera* (CNT) presented an editorial promising the workers – ‘Serenity, Concord and Unity of Action.’ The text pleaded with everybody to be calm: ‘This is the hour to foresee and prevent such a situation as has just passed.’ The printing shop of *La Batalla* (POUM) had been confiscated by the government, so the party only issued this day 500 copies of a little leaflet.

The third day of street fighting found the insurgent workers still without the leadership for relentless struggle and triumph. It found the workers deeply demoralized by the CNT cowardice and servility to the Generality. The streets were full of barricades, but many of them had been deserted. Only key points of the city were still barricades and manned by small crews of armed heroes. Durruti Street where the Regional Committee had a huge headquarters, a well fortified building, was the center of demoralization. In the proletarian region directly off Durruti Street the barricades were not only abandoned, they were torn down; their stones scattered over the street. In the outskirts of the city the workers scarcely felt the spirit of gloom that pervaded Barcelona; they still held their ‘forts’; in the suburbs the solidarity and revolutionary passion of the workers was on the ascendant.

The forces of the bosses knew how to use the breathing spells they got. While the CNT leaders confused and broke the morale of the masses, while the pseudo-Marxist POUM trailed behind the headless movement, the Generality, with its PSUC-UGT lackeys, consolidated their counter-revolutionary gains. The Stalinists were running the transport services which the Anarchists had abandoned. Police brutality roused the anger of workers, and again the barricades were manned, and bullets were spattering. With renewed energy, with fury, the proletariat attacked the class enemy. The Stalinists were the spearheads of the boss class, attacking the workers with red arm-bands, pretending to represent the poor who wanted law and order. The tradition and glory of the great October Revolution was used to crush revolutionary Spanish labor. The impression spread that the street battles were struggles within the working class, between contending proletarian organizations – not a war of antagonistic classes. The Government stepped forward as the power above the ‘squabble’, the peacemaker, and sowed dark confusion among the people, blinding open eyes to the true issue as stake – the question: which was to overcome the other and rule the nation: the bourgeoisie, which had committed so many crimes against the workers and peasants since July 1936, or the proletariat in alliance with the peasantry?

Fort Montjuich, overlooking the port of Barcelona, was in the hands of the workers. Its cannons were trained on the Generality building, were only waiting for the Marxian word to
blow the citadel of counterrevolution sky-high. The Spanish Navy was neutral, even tending to sympathize with the revolution. Many sailors fraternized with the workers behind the barricades, and announced their confidence that the Navy could be used for any purpose the workers desired. The word of Marxism was wanting to ask them to assist in the struggle for power. The armed guardians of the Post Office were also neutral; a militant vanguard, with a clear concrete program of revolt could have made the Navy, at least the rank-and-file seamen, staunch allies.

Among others the Civil Guard barracks on Travesara Street surrendered to the proletariat, and the Guards of Hostafranche district. The first was deprived of weapons by the workers; the second they forgot to disarm. Revolutionary Marxism would not have forgotten.

From the Aragon front came a section of the Durruti Column and 500 soldiers from POUM divisions. They united forces hard by Lerido and were about to march on Barcelona, fully equipped with machine guns, light artillery, tanks and so forth. They were met at Lerido and turned back, persuaded (with the papers for ‘proof’) that the ‘affair’ in Barcelona was all over. Their leaders corroborated this lie of the government. At the same time, Republican officers threatened the workers’ troops that if they marched on the city, the Government would rally soldiers from Valencia. The Durruti and POUM brigades departed, and the Valencia Government (headed by the Socialist Caballero) dispatched troops by land and sea to the embattled city.

The Friends of Durruti, the Left Anarchists, issued their first leaflet to the working people, to the fighters on the barricades. It was joyously greeted. The possessors of membership cards in the Friends of Durruti were honored highly by all barricade defenders. The leaflet was a clarion:

Disarm all the Bourgeois Forces. Socialisation of Economy. Dissolution of the political parties opposed to the working class. We will not surrender the streets. The Revolution before everything. We greet our comrades of the POUM who have fraternized with us in the streets. For the Social Revolution. Down with the Counterrevolution.

On Wednesday a second effort was made, with the backing of the Friends of Durruti, to establish a revolutionary junta. It failed. The City Committee of the FAI coordinated its defense committees but did not measure up to the vital needs of the time; they would not act for an organized offensive against the Generality. In the afternoon the Durruti group sent a delegation to the POUM, inviting participation in the forming of the revolutionary junta. Nothing materialized from the ensuing discussion; each blamed the other for the failure.

At nine o’clock the radio announced that the Central Government of Valencia would take charge of public order in Barcelona. The Minister of Justice in Valencia, an eminent member of the CNT, spoke. He deplored the continuation of the tragic ‘affair’, and said that the dead Assault Guards of Barcelona, those police executioners of the revolutionary workers, were ... ‘our brothers’. That night the CNT gave orders to its supporters to return to wage-slavery.

**May the Sixth**

Little sleep was had these critical nights by the vanguard workers. Small barricade crews kept awake, while others rested nearby, ready to rise at call. The workers, knowing their leaders better every day, expected the CNT and POUM morning papers would be against them. **La**
**Noche** (CNT) had pointed out on the 5th what might be anticipated if the workers persisted on the 6th. Its main headline screamed: ‘Cease firing!’, and in an upper corner it howled: ‘We have one common enemy: fascism. To facilitate its victory is monstrous. All arms to the front.’ Yes – it is certainly monstrous to facilitate the triumph of fascism. The proletariat of Spain is learning daily that the democratic bourgeoisie cannot only not defeat fascism, but fear the revolutionary proletariat infinitely more than they fear the fascists. The governments of Valencia and Barcelona pave the way for fascism with every measure aimed at labor. The April struggles and the May uprising were beacons for the workers, lighting the way to the certain destruction of fascism – the road to the proletarian dictatorship.

**Solidaridad Obrera** (CNT) this morning announced, ‘The CNT and the UGT have both commanded return to work’. The same issue refused all responsibility for the leaflet of the Friends of Durruti. **La Batalla** (POUM) appeared and echoed the Anarcho-Syndicalist croaking: ‘Now that the counterrevolutionary provocations have been smashed, it is necessary to withdraw from the struggle. Workers, return to labor.’ On the back page the POUM editors boasted, ‘For three days the streets have belonged to the workers’. An editorial gloated: ‘In the face of the vigorous proletarian response, in the face of the energetic counter-offensive of the toiling masses, the armed forces were rapidly demoralized and almost generally gave up the streets to the laborers’. Instead of severe analysis of the struggle, Marxist self-criticism, the POUM penmen strutted like peacocks. When the POUM workers on the barricades beside the Hotel Falcon saw this sheet, they raged and refused to leave their posts. They denounced their leaders as betrayers. The Thursday issue of **Soli**, as the CNT paper was called, was burnt like previous issues on many barricades. Nevertheless these organs exerted a grave influence on the majority of the fighting workers, baffling, breaking the discipline and courage of the uprising proletariat.

The Generality forces extended their spheres of power. Workers who ventured inside their bounds were arrested, disarmed. Methodically, the bosses were getting the situation well in hand. At 11 in the morning the Police, with some Stalinists, raided the **La Batalla** office which had been surrounded but resisted the enemy behind barricaded doors and windows. The cops knocked on the door and were admitted in peace. The POUM Executive retreated shamefully before the aggression of the Generality.

The Police, with their Stalinist aids, obtained a machine gun, 50 good rifles, several hundred hand-grenades. Molinas, a POUM official in charge of the building’s defense, offered to surrender the place without resistance, though some members favored fighting it out with the Guards. During these events the Central Executive Committee of the POUM reorganized itself by merging with the Barcelona Local Executive, then subdividing into a political and military under-committee. The purpose of this change in the party machine was clearly to shift responsibility for the acts committed unworthy of revolutionists calling themselves ‘Marxists’. The fury of the CNT rank and file compelled the resignation of the Regional Committee early in the day. But within six hours these Anarcho-Syndicalist scoundrels were back in the saddle.

Yet Thursday afternoon, defying the instructions of the CNT Regional and POUM Executive Committees, the workers were out on the barricades in full force. The heart of Barcelona labor beat high and proud, unconquered.

**May the Seventh**

Friday morning the **Soli** appeared with this caption: ‘The CNT and the UGT repeat the order to return to work’. **La Batalla**, more skilful in deceit than the reformist union leaders, called ‘For
the withdrawal of the forces of public order from the streets’. It asserted that ‘the working class should keep its arms’. As if the Generality would withdraw its forces after it had been successful in beating back the armed workers. As if the capitalists could be defeated without smashing their state. To what end should the working class keep its arms? (It may be mentioned at this point that the official POUM thesis prepared by Nin declared that it was possible for the Spanish proletariat to take power without an armed insurrection. A counter-thesis by the left-wing POUM predicted the inevitable uprising which broke out on 3 May.)

For the first time since the upheaval the Stalinist papers started to appear. Le Traball, a CP organ, invaded proletarian neighborhoods without opposition. Barricades were quietly evacuated wherever it penetrated. It branded the POUM and the Friends of Durruti ‘agents of the Fascists’. The technique perfected by the Stalin machine in Moscow of discrediting labor groups opposing the Third International’s crimes was applied to Barcelona with immense success – among the middle class.

In Sabadell, suburb of Barcelona, the local POUM leadership rebelled against the party and denounced the insurrection in language as vicious as the Stalinists. (The next day these renegades were ‘rewarded’ by the Stalinists who suppressed their local paper.)

In Gerona the CNT and the POUM rallied masses in a movement to suppress publications of the Esquerra and the PSUC. Skirmishes between the police and the proletariat took place all day Friday. Three civil guards were killed by a workers’ bomb. Isolated workers caught with guns were shot down. The bosses’ agents threw down many barricades. Friday marked the beginning of the end for the civil struggle; the bureaucrats of the CNT and the POUM had ruined the chances of revolutionary success. Things were so peaceful in some parts of the city that children took over barricades and played at civil war.

Battleships of France and Britain rode at anchor in Barcelona Harbour, ready to shell the city in case the workers captured it; and the Soli of 7 May complained, ‘The friendly powers are worried by the events in Barcelona’. [8] All through the insurrection the Generality, the Popular Front, was only the busy puppet of the Anglo-French imperialists. If President Companys & Co had not been able to manage the rebellion, the ‘democratic’ bankers of London and Paris would have come down like tigers on Barcelona. Whoever thinks a proletarian revolution is achievable without overcoming certain imperialist intervention, whoever is afraid of class war because of the danger of such intervention is no revolutionist, is an opponent of working class revolution. Marxists rely on the workers of all countries to come to the rescue of any proletariat fighting for power, just as the exploited and oppressed of the world rushed to the assistance of Soviet Russia during 1917-1920 with strikes, mutinies, and revolutions.

May the Eighth

Saturday morning opened the last day of the struggle. From 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. the Valencia government troops marched into the city, armed to the teeth.

The guns they carried were of Russian make. Moscow supplied the arms to put down the insurrection of the workers against the parliamentary capitalist state. If a genuine communist party had stood at the helm of the Soviet Union, those guns would have gone to the making of a Soviet Spain.

The Valencia soldiers were mostly workers and poor middle class folk. Workers who talked with them expressed faith that about half of the troops would have rebelled and come over to
the workers’ side if a clear-cut fight between the government and the workers had been fought. What a magnificent opportunity to attain a workers’ state, the best and only guarantee of the crushing of fascism, was lost in this May week! On Saturday the bourgeoisie flaunted its victory in the workers’ faces. The Stalinist-controlled UGT unions expelled all POUM activists. The Anarchist banner was torn from the autos of the CNT Marine Workers’ Union by government guards. The CNT holder of the Generality Ministry of Defense was ousted. CNT supervisors were removed from the mail and passport offices.

The 8 May Soli carried an editorial on ‘the pacification of the masses’. It bragged of the fact that the CNT press had been extremely effective in stopping the insurrection. The same day the editor of Tierra Y Libertad, central organ of the FAI, trumpeted:

‘Destroy the barricades, lay down your arms. Tomorrow all laborers should be at work, and the others fighting to capture Huesca and Teruel, to free Saragossa.’

La Batalla would not allow the CNT press to outdo the POUM in crass defeatism: ‘The working class should remain vigilant and not respond to provocations’, referring to the insolence of the government guards. In an editorial it stated: ‘Our party...has been, let no one doubt this, one of those which have contributed the most to restoring normalcy’. For the proletariat of Spain ‘normalcy’ meant only the re-riveting of the chains of wage-slavery.

President Companys, in the 15 May issue of the Paris journal, Ce Soir, presented his views on the May strife:

The first spark of the recent events burst forth a few days before when certain groups attempted coercion against the decision of the council of the Generality ... as a result of an order of the department of Internal Security concerning the telephone services, an order of elementary guarantee of services for the government. In the face of this indescribable attack on the government, the latter found itself with small means of defense; very small, not because it had not foreseen this development, but because of the impossibility of forestalling it. In spite of this the government put down the subversive movement without hesitation, utilizing the small forces at its disposal, aided by popular fervor, and by conversations held in the Generality with different trade union representatives, and with the assistance of several delegates from Valencia, commencing thus the return to normalcy.

Thus the capitalist president explains that his government was at first in no condition to handle the crisis, and had only a puny force to cope with the insurrection. But firm and decisive action by the Generality, coupled with open support of the Socialist: and Stalinists, together with the betrayal of the CNT and POUM officialdoms, was able to disintegrate the workers’ ranks and restore bourgeois law and order.

May the Ninth

Sunday morning boss normalcy was in full swing. The night before POUM news stands on the Plaza Catalonia had been set afire. All mass funerals were forbidden, though more than a hundred were reported dead in the revolt. The Stalinists held a large demonstration in honor of their dead Minister Sese in front of their headquarters. CNT and POUM militants were thrown in prisons. The vengeance of the boss class was felt by armed workers throughout Catalonia. In some villages dozens of POUM and CNT members were killed overnight for frightening the
exploiters.

The Stalinist-Bourgeois Terror

By Monday morning scores of workers had been murdered or were mysteriously missing. In district five of Barcelona the Estat Catala (special guardsmen of the ruling class) and PSUC gangsters attacked the POUM headquarters but were driven off by policemen, not by the POUM. The Stalinist press yelled for the suppression of the POUM as agents of Italy and Germany, members of Franco’s fifth column. The Valencia regime posted a decree in all parts of Barcelona which threatened that all persons and organizations caught in possession of rifles, bombs, and machine guns would be considered as fascists and mutineers, and treated accordingly. The master class of Spain will drench Barcelona, all Spain, in blood rather than risk the revival of the proletarian revolution.

Military Review of the May Struggle

The defenders of the Generality were outnumbered by great odds; it is estimated that there were four insurgent workers to one fighter for capitalism. A liberal estimation of the bourgeois forces, Civil, Assault, and Palace Guards, Esquerra and PSUC gunmen, would not total over 3000. Some comrades claim they had no more than 2000 actually fighting. The workers had the enemy isolated all over the city; the proletarian sections and the suburbs of Barcelona were under the complete control of the workers. In a six mile ride from the city’s center to the village of Badalona, 56 barricades had to be passed. This is an example of the way the streets were defended. The capitalist forces were isolated in the following places: 1. the Presidential Palace and the City Hall across the way; 2. the Bank of Spain on Durruti Street and the section extending west from it to the Plaza Catalonia, which includes the Municipal Police Building; 3. the Plaza Del Pino, a small square with a church tower and an Assault Guards’ barracks, between the La Batalla office and the Ramblas, both places in the hands of the workers; 4. the Plaza Catalonia and the banks on the square; 5. the Paseo de Gracia near the Plaza Catalonia; 6. The Karl Marx barracks of the Stalinists.

With a centralized aggressive leadership, in short a revolutionary Marxian vanguard, an offensive against each of these points could have annihilated them or forced surrender, just as Civil Guard barracks in the industrial suburbs were captured and the Stalinist Voroshilov Barracks was besieged.

The three weak points on the workers’ side were the CNT Building across the street from the Bank of Spain, the POUM Building near the Plaza Catalonia, and the La Batalla office between the two. At none of these places were barricades built. Their occupants did not lift a finger to establish connections with the proletarian outposts in the heart of the enemy’s territory. A great quantity of arms in these buildings was never used. Next door to the POUM Building was a house containing 50 assault guards surrounded by workers on all sides. Not one shot was fired against the place. Next door to this was a big printing shop of the Stalinists, deserted. Nothing was done to take it over. The Plaza del Pino section of the capitalist guards, a snipers’ nest that had killed many of the best revolutionary fighters, could have been overcome without much difficulty by a concerted attack of the CNT and POUM centers that surrounded it. Barricades erected hard by the American consulate could have cut off the enemy on the Plaza Catalonia from real aid. The POUM Central Office was strategically located for
accompanying this. The gallant POUM Executive would not take advantage of the foe. The CNT Building on Durruti Street may best be described as a weakhold, from the standpoint of its value to the workers in the fighting. Yet in any military plans of revolutionists it would have been considered a stronghold. The CNT barracks contained over six hundred rifles which were never distributed to the hundreds of anxious workers who needed guns.

The CNT leadership to cover up its crimes chatters today about the ‘affair’ that lasted a single day. The POUM leadership for the same reason prattles of the ‘affair’ that lasted three days. These are the respective periods when the organizations named ordered the workers to give up the streets. Facts prove that the insurrection, despite all odds, lasted four days, and only died on the fifth, Friday, with ‘normalcy’ reached by bossdom only on the eighth, Monday.

On 15 May many of the workers’ barricades were still standing, prevented from being thrown down by those who understood what emergencies might arise, those who knew that the class issue had by no means been settled; that the near future held the possibility of bloodier class battles than the past May week had seen.

Retreat and Reorganization

It was possible for the working class to conquer state power in May, as in July. On both times one fatal factor was missing – the ultimately decisive requisite for vanquishing capitalism: the Marxist revolutionary, communist program, that is, the Marxist vanguard, the party that is ‘the most advanced and resolute group of the working class parties of every country, that section which impels forward all others,’ possessing ‘the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions and ultimate general results of the proletarian movement’. (The Communist Manifesto)

The anti-Fascist Popular Front proved to be a false union of two fundamentally antagonistic forces. It was only the subordination of the proletariat to the boss class which the Stalinists and Socialists used ‘democratically’ to stifle the independent fighting spirit of the workers. It was no more ‘anti-Fascist’ in reality than the ‘Iron Front’ alliance of the German Socialists with the ‘liberal’ Hindenburg was an obstacle to Hitler.

The May uprising revealed the true nature of the Generality, as a capitalist state, fearing the armed workers far more than the fascists.

May 1937 will be remembered in history as the first time that the Stalinists were on the bourgeois side of the barricades. The Socialists were there, too, but this is nothing new to those who know the bloody story of the Socialist International, with its Scheidemanns, MacDonalds, Blums. The Stalinists surrendered the red flag of class struggle for the white of class peace; they became defenders of ‘democracy’ against the fighters for the dictatorship of the workers and farmers. They were willing to shed their blood (certainly the blood of the poor) for the glory of the ‘liberal’ powers: France (that enslaves and tortures colonial masses in Syria and Morocco) and England (that enslaves and tortures millions every day in India and Africa).

The despicable role of the Anarcho-Syndicalist apparatuses in the class struggle was made clear as daylight to the workers in doubt, even before the CNT-FAI leaders accepted offices in the boss state. Mariano Vasquez, Secretary of the National Committee of the CNT, bragged in Madrid (according to the Solidaridad Obrera, 15 May), how:

The organization made great efforts to prevent the extension of the conflict. It decided to send a delegation to each regional committee to thwart alarm and the
reproduction of the Catalanian conflict. It sent three delegates to the Aragon front to block the forces there from moving. It was but natural that, on knowing that their Barcelona comrades had been attacked, those at the front should try to help them. [This is not true! See above – author] In Barcelona the National Committee made incessant endeavors to terminate the struggle. There was really no need for the Central Government to take over the Public Order.

Isn’t this the death warrant of ‘anti-authoritarian’ Anarchism?

Only too true was the Revolutionary Workers League description of the POUM as hopelessly centrist, having corrupt roots in reformism, blown rightward and leftward with every wind of the class war. A disgrace to the name of Marxist, this organization is also a barrier which Spanish labor must overcome to reach soviet power.

The two dozen foreign comrades adhering to Trotskyism fighting in Spain are excellent brave men, whose most terrible handicap is their stubborn faith in Trotskyism. They issued a leaflet during the May struggle showing their healthy instinct but throttled by their adherence to Trotskyism: abstract, dry, unfit to solve the problems of the actual situation, the armed insurrection. It stated their perspective for the Barcelona barricade defenders:

For the revolutionary offensive. No compromise. Disarm the reactionary Civil Guards and Assault Guards. The moment is decisive. Next time will be too late. General strike in all industries not working for war until the resignation of the reactionary government. Only proletarian power can assure military victory. Full arming of the working class. Long live the unity of the CNT-FAI and POUM. Long live the unity of the Revolutionary United Front. Committees of revolutionary defense in the shops, factories, and on the barricades.

Bolshevik-Leninists Spanish Section. For the Fourth International.

To cry for the ‘resignation’ of the Generality, to shout for CNT-POUM ‘unity’ – this means to miss the whole meaning of the May days. In the first issue of their organ these Trotskyists pleaded for admission to the POUM – for the third time (in vain). When the workers stand in burning necessity for nothing less than a Bolshevik organization wholly independent of reformism and centrist, these Trotskyists persist in fulfilling the international line of their leader: the liquidation of the independent revolutionary organization into the swamp of the POUM! Compare this document with the declarations of the Friends of Durruti; the Left CNT fighters emerge superior in program. They published a second leaflet on 7 May, directed against their own Anarchist leadership, against the Generality – an additional step of the Friends in the direction of proletarian revolution.

At all times the workers struggle in May was on the plane of defensive action. Of themselves they could not coordinate the many barricades, neighborhoods, factories, towns, and so forth into a unified military structure and then take the offensive against the counter-revolution. It cannot be repeated too often: the revolutionary Marxian advance-guard was needed. Everything was favorable for such an offensive. It could have defeated the capitalist forces before the Valencia troops arrived. It would have swept those troops, or most of them, along with the revolutionary current. It would have kept the navy at least neutral, if not sympathetic. The workers of the world would have risen to the defense of victorious Spanish labor! The Stalinist strait-jacket could not have restrained the Russian masses from rallying to their aid men, money, machinery, and the strength of the workers’ state.

Although its second uprising has been beaten down, the proletariat of Catalonia has not yet met a crushing defeat. A third insurrection is ahead. The workers are in possession of more
arms than they had before 3 May. They have learned precious lessons of the class war. On 15 May the Valencia government passed through a crisis. The new Negrin regime will launch a drive of unparalleled provocations against the discontented masses.

The odds are so far against the proletariat. The imperialist powers have Spain tight in their clutches. But there is still time, if we act with speed, courage, understanding, to fuse the scattered skirmishes of the war of the classes into a proletarian revolution that will burst the national limits and give world capital hell. The floodgates of the social revolution against imperialist Europe can be opened by the invincible arms of a working class led by a revolutionary Marxian party, vanguard of the Fourth (Communist) International.

Hugo Oehler
Barcelona 16 May 1937

Notes

1. Bosses’ Popular Front – a popular American expression for the Bourgeois People’s Front Government.

2. CNT – The National Confederation of Labor of Spain, syndicalists, similar to the Industrial Workers of the World in America, anti-Marxists. The FAI (Anarchist Federation of Iberia) composed of believers in the anarchist philosophy as distinguished from union members.


5. UGT – General Union of Labor (Socialist- Stalinist federation of unions).

6. Esquerra – Capitalist party of Catalonia; ‘liberals’.

7. The Generality violated its own law of October 1936, giving the Telephone Building over to the control of the industrial unions.

8. Solidaridad Obrera, 7 May, issued an extra containing these cries of class peace: ‘The struggle is over. Concord is reborn with peace. Workers, brothers, united as one man for fraternity and victory …’ The Solidaridad Obrera was the first journal to foresee and condemn ‘the painful events which have taken place in Barcelona’. And this gem: ‘Today the Workers’ Patrols have made a noble gesture, which indicates their high sense of responsibility, placing themselves under the orders of the special delegation of public order of the government of the Republic’ – that is to say, in the hands of the agents of Anglo-French imperialism.

Last updated on 27.6.2003