

# A New World in Our Hearts: 100 Years of the CNT



The *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labour) was founded in Barcelona in 1910 and sees its first centenary this year. The CNT is best known for the central role it played in the anarchist revolution in Spain 1936-039 but it is still active today in promoting anarcho-syndicalist ideas throughout the Spanish labour movement with an emphasis on mutual aid, federalism (collectives linked with each other on a 'federal' basis i.e. without any superior central authority) and worker self-management by direct democracy. It is an affiliate of the International Worker's Association (*Asociación Internacional de los Trabajadores* or *AIT*).

The CNT evolved from the syndicalist labour federation *Solidaridad Obrera* (Workers Solidarity) around 1907, formed in an attempt to consolidate the Catalan trade unions which were in disarray after the failure of the 1902 General Strike; as well as to offer workers an anarchist alternative to the socialist/reformist UGT. An early principle was that the group would only allow workers organisations into its ranks. Anarchist ideas were popular in Spain at the time and the theories of Bakunin in particular were influential in rural Spanish village society where collectivisation and mutual aid were commonplace. Marxism, while it had converts, was not especially

influential among workers at this time.

At their 2nd Congress in 1910 *Solidaridad Obrera* decided to extend its idea beyond Catalonia and to the whole of Spain and so the CNT was born. The CNT opened its ranks to all workers and students except cops, soldiers and other henchmen of the State. While party political members could belong, party officers were forbidden so that no party political could influence the workers movement.

The CNT hoped to encourage worker-solidarity, to improve working conditions and to set the course for worker emancipation from state servitude. This emancipation, of course, was worker-control of factories and the means of production through collectivisation of industry and the socialisation of the community. Each collective would work in solidarity with others leading to a radical transformation of society towards anarchist-communism.

To this end, at the first CNT Congress, a General Strike was called which resulted in the organisation being declared illegal by the State between 1911 and 1914, but by 1916 reformists within the CNT leadership had a change of focus and began working alongside their rivals, the socialist UGT, towards a 'unified' labour struggle. In 1919 they staged another General Strike (*La Canadiense*) which ground Catalonia to a halt and forced in the 8 hour day for workers. Their popularity consequently soared to 700,000 members. The State responded and union members were assassinated by hired guns, the infamous *Pistoleros*. In 1922 the CNT affiliated itself with the AIT, declaring its internationalist position, but the rise of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship from 1923 onwards sent the organisation underground into clandestinity.

In 1927 the *Federación Anarquista Ibérica* (Iberian Anarchist Federation, or FAI) was established in Valencia ostensibly to counter the de Rivera dictatorship but also with the task of keeping the CNT mobilised towards libertarian communism while at the same time providing a check to its

more liberal members like 'sugar boy' Salvador Seguí and Ángel Pestaña who veered towards legalist unionism and the negation of radical anarchism, which they considered idealist. It was Seguí, for example, who in his position as CNT leader had made overtures to the reformist UGT while National Secretary Pestaña called for the legalization of the CNT. The FAI played an important role in maintaining anarcho-syndicalist aims.

The de Rivera dictatorship fell apart towards the end of 1929 with the collapse of the peseta, leading to great dissatisfaction among the bourgeoisie and officer classes while a renewed vigour among the CNT-FAI saw membership soar. But there was a considerable split between the national leadership and the rank and file. Pestaña had secured legal recognition of the CNT and the collaborationist agenda continued under the guise of bringing down the dictatorship, while the FAI began to reorganise.

In 1930, with Spain in the grip of recession, nationalist, socialist and republican parties (and some CNT observers) began planning to overthrow the old Spanish monarchy and usher in the 2nd Republic. Under the Second Republic women gained the vote and substantial autonomy was given to Catalonia and the Basque Country but inherited debt from the de Rivera dictatorship saw ongoing political unrest and a swing to the right with CEDA (*Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas*) gaining power in 1933. The following year it brutally suppressed militant activity but in turn catalyzed the political spectrum and invigorated the anarchists.

CEDA finally collapsed in 1936 while the CNT leadership offered cautious support to the transitory government of Berenguer. It is important to indicate that there was a considerable gulf between the CNT leadership, largely drawn from intellectual circles, and ordinary rank and file members on the ground. Although still officially an anarcho-syndicalist organisation, it is remarkable that delegates at national level were not instantly

recallable according to syndicalist theory and perhaps it is here where we see cracks beginning to show. The gulf between the reformists and the anarchists began to widen but clashes over strike action with state forces saw the anarchists withdraw. There were arguments and debates over the abstentionist policy and between radical *faístas* (of the FAI) and *non-faístas* but state power began to wane by summer 1936. By this stage, and constant worker agitation and industrial action, the CNT had over 1.5 million members and was gaining strength beyond Catalonia, in Aragón and Andalucía especially.

The Popular Front government elected in February 1936 was unable to restore social and economic stability after the collapse of the monarchy while ongoing strikes, demonstrations and land expropriation continued. The ruling classes, fearing the worst, attempted a coup. Franco's fascist forces were defeated across much of Spain by the workers in arms.

The CNT and FAI were at the forefront of arming the workers as the state all but collapsed. Militias were formed and in July 1936 they consolidated their actions and began the collectivisation of industry and the socialization of society. The CNT attempted to establish a society based on coordination through decentralized and horizontal federations of participatory industrial collectives and agrarian communes. This was achieved through widespread expropriation and collectivization of privately owned productive resources. In some areas the use of money was eliminated completely or replaced by coupon systems which were distributed according to need rather than hours worked.

The anarchist journalist Souchy remarked "*The characteristic of the majority of CNT collectives is the family wage. Wages are paid according to the needs of the members and not according to the labor performed by each worker.*" By focusing on what people actually needed rather than individual remuneration a system of anarchist-communism (to each his need) was attempted. Lands were expropriated and collectivised and collective labour undertaken in the production of food crops. Important collectives sprung up in Alcañiz, Calanda, Alcorisa, Valderrobres and Fraga. Some hospitals and schools were also collectivised.

The attack on state and religious institutions, sexual liberation and women's emancipation (*Mujeres libres*) and other revolutionary ideas were commonplace though it would be foolish to suggest things were perfect.

Critics chose to look at the urban revolution as merely a form of worker-controlled capitalism where competition in the market and worker exploitation continued, although others have commented that production within these models subsequently increased, while it was in the rural landscape where libertarian communism was actually realised.

Ironically on November 6, several CNT members joined the government with Juan García Oliver becoming Minister of Justice (abolishing legal fees and ordering all criminal records destroyed), Juan López becoming Minister of Commerce, Joan Peiró taking the role of Minister of Industry while Federica Montseny, Spain's first female minister, became Minister of Health. This brought fierce criticism especially outside of Spain for this compromise of anarchist ideals, while others would later consider the failure of the revolution to have started here. But the Stalinists were gaining ground in government, Franco and the fascists were at the door and even Emma Goldman conceded that this collaboration was the "lesser of two evils". It remains a controversial area to this day.

But the growing Communist Party influence was backed by Stalin and conflict between the CNT-FAI and the communists became widespread. The communists called for the anarchists to disarm and the counter revolution was begun. Spain was plunged into civil war until Franco and the fascists consolidated their power and the CNT was declared illegal and its assets seized while anarchists were executed, imprisoned or driven into exile. By 1939 it was over.

Over 150,000 CNT activists were subsequently executed.

The CNT continued to fight a guerrilla war against the Franco regime. The *Maquis*, the CNT in exile, fought a campaign against the Franco regime until the 1960s and also helped to support the French Resistance during WW2. During this time there were splits in the movement but even former Minister Federica Montseny had declared the futility of collaboration with government. In 1960 the Libertarian Movement in Exile (MLE or CNT-MLE) was formed and at a congress in Limoges they established *Sección Defensa Interior* (DI) with the central purpose of assassinating Franco. There were several unsuccessful attempts over the years.

Despite repression the CNT, although drastically diminished, began to gain ground during the 1960s and especially after Franco's death in 1975. The CNT held its first congress since 1936 in 1979, attended by many international delegates

including members of the Belfast Anarchist Collective. A split occurred with the CNT Valencia Congress (later CGT) in favour of union elections splitting off from the main group. A legal battle ending in 1989 saw the latter group having to drop the CNT initials. Thus began the CNT's efforts to recover their assets which had been seized under Franco. In 1996 over 100 CNT militants squatted the Economic and Social Council offices in Madrid which was in charge of repatriation of union assets and some agreement was reached by 2004 but the CNT continues to demand a full return of what is owed.

The struggle at Puerto Real shipyards in 1987 saw the CNT coming to the fore once again. Workers came out against a 'rationalisation policy' imposed by the boss class. The CNT were involved in consolidating village assemblies and various acts of sabotage. Women came out in solidarity with their men and carried on the struggle outside the shipyards so that the strike became community-wide. Meanwhile shipyard offices were occupied, telephone lines were cut, railway lines blocked and barricades erected against cops and strike breakers. Occupations of certain of the bigger boats allowed catapult-wielding defenders to stem off state attempts to restore order. There were meetings and shows of solidarity from CNT branch unions across Spain. The shipyards subsequently did not close while workers gained several reforms. This form of militancy among workers continues to be promoted by the CNT across Spain, building on earlier struggles and advancing the movement, creating ground for further and potentially greater actions and continuing to develop a sense of solidarity among workers.

The CNT has over 30,000 members today concentrated in Madrid, Catalonia, Andalucía and the Basque regions. There are 12 regional federations and another in France and some 133 cities and towns have a CNT local. There were commemorative celebrations in 2006 to mark the 70th anniversary of the revolution and there are plans to mark the CNT centenary this year. The CNT remains anarcho-syndicalist in outlook and continues to agitate among workers, despite efforts by the boss class to divide and cripple the movement.

In 2010 following the introduction of severe austerity measures and crippling public sector cuts in Spain in the wake of ongoing recession there were a number of stoppages and several general strikes, many of which were called by the reformist UGT. The CNT issued a statement declaring that these 'gesture strikes'



are less than insufficient and that an indefinite general strike is the only way forward. In a statement issued by the CNT on June 8th 2010:

*"We believe it is a mistake to continue 'negotiating' labour reform, which is simply a concession to employers. The only possibility for correcting this situation is to fight this economic aggression through social confrontation, to continue and expand protests to all sectors."*

*These great evils can only be treated with great remedies, and such remedies do not include, of course, a 24-hour general strike which, assuming that UGT and CCOO (the two major reformist unions in Spain) dared to actually convene one, would act only as a giant safety valve for employee discontent.*

*An indefinite general strike paralysing the country until the government withdraws anti-worker and anti-social actions would by contrast act as a binder for workers to recover their class consciousness and act together, with an eye to the destruction of the capitalist system through social revolution which is the only truly effective medicine against congenital diseases of the system. "*

It is not possible to do justice to the CNT in such a brief article but this overview is a reminder of the achievements of the anarcho-syndicalist philosophy in past events and those yet to come.

