

Unit 18

Spain: The Collectives

This Unit aims to

- Give an overview of how the collectives in the Spanish Revolution were organised.
- Consider the problems faced by the collectives.
- Describe how the collectives functioned internally.
- Examine the mechanisms for the production and distribution of goods.
- Indicate how lessons learned from the Spanish collectives are still relevant today.

Terms and abbreviations

CNT: Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour). Anarcho-syndicalist union.

LEC: Local Economic Council

UGT: Union General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union). Reformist trade union controlled by the socialists.

Introduction

The collectives remain, to this day, a most striking example of the possibilities of collective organisation and economy. Both the scale and pace of collective development (despite the rigours of fascist attack) and the confidence and zeal with which it was embraced, are remarkable. While the achievements of this period were short-lived, over 60 years on, collective organisation based on workers self-management of society on the Spanish model still offers a modern and real alternative to both capitalism and the Marxist state run economy.

The collectives were built by the anarcho-syndicalist CNT (see Units 15 and 17) and the Spanish across many areas of the country, during the Revolution and Civil War of 1936-39. They are often described as the 'economic' or 'work-based' form of anarchist organisation, although in fact, they had a large 'social' content too. Nevertheless, the collectives were the means by which the CNT organised production (and to some extent, consumption) of goods and services.

It is useful to start by putting the anarcho-syndicalist socio-economic system of collectives in context, by outlining the alternatives on offer to humanity. Firstly, we have capitalism, the so-called 'Free Market' system. Under this, individuals or groups of individuals own the means of production. The theory is that efficiency is ensured through competition, while motivation is provided through the pursuit of profit. Though production is owned and run in the interest of the few (rich), those who support the free market would claim that democratic control of the economy is ensured through the market mechanism. In other words, by choosing to buy product "A" as opposed to product "B", the individual is casting his or her vote in choosing what society should produce. In theory then, it is not capitalist production power, but consumer choice, which dictates production through purchasing power. In practice, the theory is well known to be nonsense. One anarchist, proposed an alternative theory of how capitalism really functions;

"..the aim of modern capitalism (is) an international political economy which is organised by powerful states and secret bureaucracies...(their)... primary function is to serve the concentrations of private power, which administer markets through

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their own internal operations and networks of corporate alliances, including the inter-firm transactions that are mislabelled 'trade'. They rely on the public subsidy, for research and development, for innovation and for bail-outs when things go wrong. They rely on the powerful state for protection from dangerous 'democracy opening'. In such ways, they seek to ensure that the prime beneficiaries of the world's wealth are the right people: the smug and the prosperous."

The alternative to capitalism advocated by much of the revolutionary movement since the 1920s has been the state run economy. Under this system, the economy comes under state control. Decisions are made by political leaders, usually the communist party, acting on behalf of the rest of society, in whose interest they supposedly rule. Having decided what needs producing, a 5-year plan is drawn up which lays down production targets for every sector of industry. The 'plan' is then passed to state agents who carry it out and run the economy in the process. The most obvious drawback is that, in reality, the vast majority have very little say in how society functions (much like the capitalist free market). However, since under the state-run system, production, technology and ideas are even more controlled than under capitalism, people retreat into passive acceptance, under an oppressive, stagnant economic system devoid of initiative and motivation.

The only other form of society yet envisaged by humanity is a socio-economic system under which the means of production is owned and controlled by the whole of society for the benefit of the whole of society. Rather than attempt to demonstrate how this society would function in theory, let us now turn to the Spanish collectives, to examine how such a society began to function in practice.

The events in Spain were not of anarcho-syndicalists' making (see Unit 17). Far from planning and initiating events, they simply responded to the actions of fascists. The General Strike called by the CNT on the eve of the fascist uprising on July 19th, 1936 was aimed at defeating fascism, not overthrowing capitalism. The CNT was not prepared or strong enough to start a revolution, and they knew it. However, with the government in disarray and in the face of a fascist coup, people quickly organised to meet the fascist threat. The anarcho-syndicalists formed armed militias, which stood up to the fascist forces, ensuring the failure of the coup in many areas of Spain. With the state having temporarily 'melted away', it was left to the anarcho-syndicalists to organise society in many areas, while also co-ordinating military support for those pockets still struggling with the fascists.

Anarcho-syndicalists had never before been presented with the task of organising society on anything like the scale required in Spain. Nevertheless, they were well prepared. As an activist who took part in these events noted later;

"For many years, the anarcho-syndicalists of Spain considered their supreme task to be the social transformation of society. In their assemblies of syndicates and groups, in their journals, their brochures and books, the problem of the social revolution was discussed incessantly and in a systematic fashion."

Building the new society within the shell of the old, which was now a core principle of anarcho-syndicalism, was to serve the CNT well in 1936. Democratic ideas and methods had been developed over a long period within the CNT, and these were now swiftly applied to the Spanish economy and the wider society. Thus, the transition from capitalism to workers' control was achieved quickly and orderly.

Before examining in detail the way in which the CNT ran the economy so successfully, it is worth noting the problems they faced in accomplishing this remarkable achievement.

Firstly, they did not inherit a self-contained national economy, since they only controlled a number of regions. Many areas of the economy, both production (e.g. raw materials) and consumption (e.g. trade and supply) were in fascist hands.

Secondly, even in the non-fascist zone, the country had not been functioning properly for some years and was therefore in need

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of massive overhaul and investment.

Thirdly, the republican government did still maintain control in some areas, and the CNT could not depend on them for mutual support. The republican movement vehemently opposed the CNT's bringing of the economy under workers' control and did all it could to sabotage the collectivist movement. For example, Barcelona and the Catalonia region, which came largely under anarcho-syndicalist control, had been using 56,000 tonnes of coal per day prior to the Revolution. Apart from 300 tonnes mined locally, this was imported from other areas of Spain. However, the main coal producing region of Spain, Asturias, came under republican control. Rather than export coal to Catalonia, the republican government stockpiled it. As a result, Catalonia was faced with a severe fuel shortage throughout the Revolution.

Fourthly, at the same time as facing all these problems, the CNT had to fight off the threat of the fascists' invasion, and attempt to liberate the areas the fascists controlled, in a war that was one-sided from the start (see Unit 17). In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the CNT militias, having defeated fascism in their own areas, marched to Aragon to liberate it from fascism. Lacking modern weaponry, the assault became bogged down, leading to a front line being established across Aragon, where anarcho-syndicalists and fascists confronted each other. Fearing an anarcho-syndicalist victory, the Republican government cut off supplies to the militias. This meant that the areas under self-management now had to carry the burden of supplying the militias with clothes, food and even arms. Conventional economists estimate that, for this type of warfare, for every 30,000 soldiers, an economy of some 200,000 people is needed to keep it supplied. Such were the problems faced by the self-managed economy from the moment it came into being, it is surprising that the collective movement ever got off the ground, and a testament to its appeal that it spread so quickly.

Turning to the collectives themselves, we should start by ridding ourselves of a common myth - namely, that the collectives were largely agrarian, and would be unable to function in a modern industrial economy. Certainly, Spain's industrialisation lagged behind the advanced capitalist countries of Europe and North America, but it was well underway. Some 2 million workers out of a population of 24 million were employed in industry. Also, 75% of Spanish industry was located within the region of Catalonia, where the anarcho-syndicalist movement was strongest. Thus, widespread workers' control of industry did take place within the Spanish Revolution, as the collective movement rapidly spread through Spain's industrial heartland.

Within Catalonia alone, textiles, construction and engineering industries, bakeries, public utilities, trains, buses and taxis, health services, theatres, cinemas, beauty parlours, hotels, restaurants, and many other workplaces were all collectivised under workers' control. The collectivisation movement was especially strongly centred on Barcelona, which was even then an industrial city of 1.5 million people. All of the collectives functioned in a basically similar fashion. Each workplace held a full meeting of all workers (workplace assembly) and elected a committee to co-ordinate production within the immediate workplace. Thereafter, workplace assemblies were held regularly. The committee in each workplace was recallable and answerable to all workers through the assemblies. In other words, the workplace assembly could replace or remove the committee or its members at any time. The committee was there to carry out the decisions made at the assembly, and was controlled directly by it.

In each local area, all the collectivised workplaces in the same industry met together to form a local workplace federation, which co-ordinated local production. This meant, instead of competing and duplicating production as in capitalist times, far greater efficiency was achieved by this local federal system of co-ordinated production. In addition, all the workplace federations in a local area organised themselves into a Local Economic Council (LEC). Since all production and service facilities were represented here, co-ordination of all work in the locality was made possible. In turn, the local workplace federations and LECs were organised regionally and nationally into National Confederations of Industry and a National Economic Confederation.

Public Transport

This integrated collective system was not the result of a master plan imposed from outside. It came about by the workers themselves using the ideas and methods of anarcho-syndicalism and applying them in practice. For instance, immediately after the defeat of fascism, the most urgent task was to feed the population. This was no small task in a city the size of Barcelona. Even while fighting was still going on in the streets, the CNT began to organise food distribution. Food committees were established in neighbourhoods throughout the city. These collected and stored provisions in large warehouses, which acted as distribution points. Markets were re-opened under workers' control. Mobile committees went into the surrounding countryside to collect freely donated food to supply the markets. No compulsion was used in this task, and since many farmers in Catalonia were members of the CNT or at least sympathised with its aims, solidarity between town and country was easily established.

The food committees worked with the CNT workplace organisations of the food, catering and hotel industries to establish communal feeding halls in local neighbourhoods. Within a couple of weeks of the Revolution, these food halls were feeding upwards of 120,000 people per day. The system soon began to evolve into an established, democratically controlled food distribution system. Large wholesale food distributors came under collective control, and workers in 30 food-related industries formed themselves into the Food Industrial Union to co-ordinate food production.

Before the Revolution, most of Barcelona's bread was baked at night in hundreds of small bakeries, the majority of which were damp, gloomy cellars infested with roaches and rodents. The Food Industrial Union immediately set about systematically building new bakeries, with modern ovens and equipment. As a result, better working conditions, higher productivity and lower prices were quickly achieved through collective modernising effort. As the new self-regulating democratic system of food supply evolved, a barter system emerged between the countryside and city, as surplus goods and services were traded. The food that came into the city this way was distributed by food co-operatives and the Food Workers Union. What had been a real threat of city starvation was rapidly overcome. The efficiencies of the new collective and barter systems were such that the availability of many foodstuffs actually increased, despite the war conditions.

Once it started, collectivisation spread rapidly. For example, the Barcelona transport system, critical to the life and productivity of the city, was quick to reap the benefits of workers' control.

The most important method of transport in Barcelona was the tram system, which had over 60 routes criss-crossing the city. It was privately owned, employing 7,000 workers, 6,500 of whom were members of the CNT. After the fascists were evicted from Barcelona, the CNT transport section requested members of the Militia to accompany them to the offices of the Barcelona Transport Company. There, they found the management had already fled, taking all available funds with them.

An appeal was immediately put out over the radio for tram workers to return to work. A mass meeting was then held, at which it was decided to run the tram system under workers' control. Delegates were elected to a general committee to co-ordinate the tram system. Each section within the workplace organised its own workplace committee and took decisions that affected them directly. Regular assemblies were organised at which the activities of the general committee were monitored and overall strategy, improvements, and so on were discussed.

Within days, the tram system was functioning again. Damage caused by street fighting was already repaired, and the trams had been re-sprayed in the red and black livery of anarcho-syndicalism. Far from the chaos that your average boss would predict, the service ran smoothly, and plans were soon being laid to improve the infrastructure of the tram system. Safety was number one priority, as old and dangerous trailer cars were replaced with power cars, and poor sections of tracks were re-laid. Sharp bends were straightened and sections of single track were upgraded to double track to end diversions and delays.

The repair shops, which before the Revolution had been restricted to general maintenance and emergency repairs, were transformed. New lathes, furnaces, milling machines and electrical wiring machines were installed. These improved productivity, and allowed the repair shops to complete repairs and maintenance faster. They then began to also replace the old power supply system and even build new tram units designed by the workers themselves, which were lighter, safer, and able to carry more passengers. New machines also meant less manual workshop space was needed, and

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sections were converted to arms production. Before long, the workers at the repair shops were building howitzers and rockets too.

Fares for tram journeys were also revolutionised. A low, flat-rate fare was introduced which was the same for all journeys. Many, including the old and young, were allowed to travel free. The number of passengers increased, as efficiency rose dramatically. Also, despite fares being lowered, finances did not suffer, since there were now no fat cat salaries and shareholders, and more journeys meant more fares being collected.

Working conditions for the tram workers improved, wages were equalised, and the working week was reduced to 35 hours. The retirement age was reduced to 60 on full pay. Alongside these improvements and shorter week, the efficiencies continued to accumulate as workers regularly reviewed their working practice to make it better. As time went on, an increasingly large proportion of production was geared to the war effort through arms manufacture. On top of all this, the tram system was still able to run at a surplus. The extra money was used to subsidise the bus system and other less prosperous collectives within Barcelona.

In a similar way to the trams, the privately owned regional railways were also quickly collectivised. There was an urgent need to transport fighters and military equipment to Aragon to halt the fascist advance. For this, the railways in Catalonia had to start running again. Even while fighting was still going on around Catalonia, the railway workers took control of the railways. By July 20th, 1936 the first train load of militia left for Aragon. The railway collectives were based on a complex system of interlocking accountable committees elected from mass assemblies. A number of committees answerable directly to the workers were established to examine ways of improving efficiency. Despite the constant lack of fuel, the number of trains running daily was maintained at the same level as prior to the Revolution.

A survey of the railways was quickly undertaken, and plans were drawn up to eradicate waste and duplication. As these plans were brought into action, an integrated train system was developed in Catalonia for the first time. Like on the trams, the train workshops were modernised and partially converted to production for the war effort. Within a week of the fascist uprising, the first ambulance was produced by the railway workshops. The design and efficiency of the vehicles quickly won praise from medical staff.

The defeat of fascism was the overriding concern of the collective movement. Thousands of young men and women volunteered for the militias, with some 20,000 workers alone volunteering from the Barcelona textiles industry. There was no shortage of fighters volunteering to risk their lives against fascism. Indeed, many workers across the western world were prepared to go and fight. However, the CNT issued an international appeal for workers to stay in their country and organise support were they were, instead of travelling to Spain. Nor was the problem in supplying the militias with food, clothing or medical supplies. Both the agricultural and urban collectives donated freely to the militias. The overriding problem was the shortage of modern arms and equipment. The main culprit in this was, as already stated, the Republican government, which feared workers winning their battle on the Aragon front even more than it feared fascism.

Faced with a chronic shortage of arms, the collectives began building a munitions industry within Catalonia from scratch. This was no easy task, given the lack of engineering industry within the region. Yet, as we have already seen with the tram and train workers, they did not have to be told to begin arms production. As what little engineering there was became collectivised, it was converted to the job in hand. The largest engineering factory, the Hispano-Suzia Automobile Company, was collectivised and producing armed cars within days.

Nevertheless, converting factories was not enough, and there was little choice but to build new munitions factories. Within a year, a collective-run munitions industry of 80,000 workers was established within Catalonia. The workers themselves designed and built the machinery needed to produce arms. Over 200 heavy-duty hydraulic presses, 178 revolving lathes, and hundreds of milling and boring machines were built in order to produce the hardware needed to keep the front supplied.

Health

It remains a great shame that the fascist threat hung over the entire period of the collective movement. What could have been achieved if only the fascists had not been there, or had not been so strongly backed by international capitalism and fascism? Nevertheless, despite the war effort to defend Spanish people from fascism understandably taking priority, the CNT was still able to put into practice some of the basic principles it had long been arguing for. One of the most important achievements was the collectivised health system established within the anarcho-syndicalist areas.

The general health of the Spanish working class in 1936 was appalling. Infant mortality rates were the highest in Europe, and diseases such as tuberculosis were endemic. The CNT had a record of fighting for improvements in health provision, as well as in general living and working conditions. The CNT also targeted sexual health and education, both as part of a wider campaign for women's equality, and specifically against sexually transmitted diseases, which were also endemic across Spain.

In Catalonia, living and working conditions were horrific, as in industrial centres everywhere experiencing the first stages of capitalist development. Immediately after the Revolution, the CNT health union in Catalonia began to create a health system, 'create' being the operative word. It was not a case of taking over existing hospitals and clinics. For a large percentage of the population, these did not exist. In embarking on this mammoth task, the CNT first split Catalonia into nine sections, which were then divided into 26 secondary centres, according to population and health requirements. A central administrative committee was established to co-ordinate health services provision across Catalonia. As with the entire health industry, this was under workers' control, federalised and run from the bottom up. In other words, the delegates to all committees were put there by workers in mass meetings, and were fully accountable and recallable, as with all collectives.

The massive efforts that were put into developing health care started to pay off immediately. Indeed, the achievement of the collectivised health service remains truly a triumph of the Revolution. Within a year, every single isolated village was covered by free access to health care. Large stately homes were taken over and new hospitals began to be constructed, all within weeks of the Revolution. By the year-end, Barcelona boasted 18 hospitals, 17 sanatoriums, 22

day-clinics, 6 psychiatric hospitals, and several specialised hospitals, including a large tuberculosis facility. Dental work was free, as were optical care and glasses. After a worker-controlled review of the pharmaceutical industry, it was totally reorganised, from research laboratories to pharmacies, with new dispensaries being set up throughout Catalonia. It is worth noting that doctors, especially young doctors, who had been closely aligned with the Church and had opposed both collectivisation and public provision, were quickly won over when it became increasingly obvious just what could be achieved under workers' self-management.

The Wider Economy

The urban collectives were not just restricted to the transport, health and food supply sectors. Every conceivable type of workplace was collectivised, and many sectors virtually entirely so. The textile industry, which employed a quarter of a million workers, was completely collectivised. And the process was not only widespread in Catalonia. Although this was undisputedly the anarcho-syndicalist stronghold, many industries outside Catalonia were also collectivised.

Nor did it just take place in large-scale workplaces; small firms and small-scale service industries and shops were included. To cite just one case, a mass meeting of all the owners and workers employed in Barcelona's hairdressers led to all the shops being merged into one sector controlled by the workers, as the employers agreed to hand over possession. The industry was totally reorganised under collective control, and many small or run down shops were closed. Large salons were established across the city, providing a far more effective and better-equipped service.

However, space does not allow us to examine the urban collectives in every type of workplace. What is important, is to look at how the wider collectivised economy was run beyond the individual industries. As mentioned above, industries in each locality came together to form a Local Economic Council (LEC). This was controlled by the local workers, and had the necessary job of co-ordinating production and supply of goods and services. This involved assessing both production levels and immediate overall needs (consumer demand). In August 1937, what had by then become regional economic councils were federated into a National Economic Council, at an economic congress of workers' organisations held in Valencia. The aim of this body was to co-ordinate the entire system of industrial and agricultural collectives nationally.

As with all anarcho-syndicalist organisations, the economic councils were democratically controlled, being run on the now-familiar system of recallable delegates. The LECs made decisions affecting the general economy in their area. For example, in Barcelona, it was decided to introduce measures to deal with pressing unemployment inherited from capitalism. The Barcelona Economic Council consulted with the surrounding agricultural collectives and drew up a plan to modernise agriculture outside the city. This would employ more people more productively and raise food production. The collectives agreed the plan, and the money was released to set it in motion.

In another example, the munitions industrial union federation of Catalonia approached the Catalonia Economic Council to explain that they were experiencing an aluminium shortage, due to Spain's aluminium production falling into fascist hands. A commission was quickly established involving technicians, chemists and engineers, and a new plant was designed. These were put before a conference and it was decided to proceed with the building of the factory.

In a rather different industry, the National Economic Council was approached for assistance. Spain's shoe production industry, which was already under collective control, was suffering from rising leather prices due to the economic blockade. Under the threat of a shoe shortage, an investigation of the options was undertaken, which led to a plan to invest in raw materials and modernise the collectives' production facilities. Again, it was passed, the plan implemented, and shoe production increased.

Finance for investments considered by the Economic Councils came from the collectives themselves. Surpluses from collectives were pooled into the non-profit making Central Labour Bank in Barcelona. Through the work of the Economic Councils, the Bank was able to direct resources to where they could be best utilised, and redistribute funds from rich collectives to poor ones. It also arranged foreign exchange for the import of goods and raw materials.

In many urban areas, money was still used as the main method of exchange on a daily basis, particularly between the non-collectivised economy and the collectivised one. The anarcho-syndicalists accepted this partial form of collective economy as inevitable given the situation. To make collectivisation fully integrated, where all aspects of the economy were included, would have meant direct conflict with the Republican government and breaking up the anti-fascist alliance. Thus, the urban collectives, though non-capitalist internally, were forced to operate in a wider capitalist economy. Despite these drawbacks, they stand as a remarkable example of a socio-economic system run directly by the workers themselves. In a short and stressful period not of their making, people proved they were able to meet society's needs through self-organisation, and make large steps towards equality in the process. They remain proof, if proof were needed, that modern industrial production can be run extremely successfully and efficiently, entirely free of capitalism and the profit motive.

The Agricultural Collectives

Turning our attention to the agricultural collectives established during the Spanish Revolution brings us to another major anarcho-syndicalist success story. With a massive following in the countryside which easily matched that of the urban areas, the amount of land brought under collective control was huge. Around 1,700 agricultural collectives were established during the Revolution, involving some 3,200,000 workers. The scale and intensity of the agricultural collective movement was huge by any measure. So much so, that they were able to go much further towards a completely collective economy, and a socio-economic system based on the principles of libertarian communism.

In many ways, the agricultural collectives represented a new phenomenon in human relations. This was a huge (and hugely successful) socio-economic experiment, and it pioneered a new way of living based on mutual aid and solidarity. Indeed, the fact that this movement appeared in rural Spain at all puts paid to the myth that apparently 'backward' rural farmers are incapable of understanding highly progressive ideas. Incidentally, this fact also finally destroys Marx's theory that the peasantry by nature is reactionary, and exposes it as pure bias on his part.

As in the cities, the peasantry moved quickly to collectivise. Land vacated by landlords fleeing after the failure of the fascist coup was quickly collectivised and pressed into the service of the workers. Again, much as in the cities, the method of collectivisation was governed by deep-rooted anarcho-syndicalist culture, which had evolved over several decades. Firstly, land was collectivised on a purely voluntary basis. Secondly, those who wished to join agreed that all but three personal possessions would be pooled into collective ownership. Thirdly, special provision was made for those who didn't want to join - and not everyone did. The Marxists had long-agonised over what to do about peasants who did not wish to collectivise, and they ended up forcing them to do so, and thus brought tyranny and famine. But the anarcho-syndicalists solution was simplicity itself. Those who wished to stay out of the collectives were allocated land and allowed to farm it, so long as they did not employ labour. Furthermore, every effort was made to support them. They were even given access to the collective's resources such as agricultural machinery and fertiliser, and were generally allowed the same democratic rights as the collective members. This strategy avoided

friction, and many individuals subsequently joined the collectives when they saw for themselves what the advantages were.

The agricultural collectives themselves were run in a similar manner to the urban ones. Regular mass assemblies were held (usually weekly), normally centred on the village or town. All members of the collective were welcome, and all had equal speaking and voting rights. The level of debate was usually high, with many contributing, in an open and encouraging atmosphere. Indeed, non-collectivists living in the area were usually welcome too, and often voted. From this assembly, an administrative committee or commission was elected to co-ordinate the activities of the collective. This was subject to the usual anarcho-syndicalist principles of workers' control, recallability and accountability. In larger towns, these committees were broken down into industrial sectors, e.g. food, education, health, transport, etc.

Typically, land was divided according to cultivation type. Workers were then recruited to each sector, and these elected delegates. The delegates would work alongside their fellow members by day, and meet at the end of each day to co-ordinate production in their own time. As in the urban collectives, economies of scale and eradication of profits and absentee landowners led to increased production and greater yield. Surpluses were ploughed back into newer agricultural machinery, to continue the rising productivity cycle. Keen to make use of scientific knowledge, many collectives set aside areas to experiment with new and improved crop trials, and consulted experts on all areas of agro-research. Agricultural schools were set up in all regions in order to further foster the culture of modernisation and development.

Here, we begin to see what it was that lay at the heart of collective life. Though the mass assemblies formed the basis of the democratic structure, it was the social interaction and cultural spirit of freedom and experimentation that made the collectives so attractive. Workers had time, interest and the knowledge that they would all benefit from dealing with practical realities facing them. The result was an endless process of improvement and refinement. Work became creative and enjoyable, and social life became more complex and interesting. The striving for constant improvement is a feature of the collectives, and is evidence that innovation and motivation are not intrinsically linked to the capitalist profit motive. In fact, getting rid of

The Levant Federation

this actually led to an explosion of these precious attributes in the collective movement.

In the orange growing region of Seville, peasants began to grow potatoes and cereal crops amongst the fruit trees, reducing dependency on the single orange crop. From the initiatives of the collectives, a whole new large-scale manufacturing industry was created based on agricultural by-products. They also built and operated fruit and vegetable canneries and other processing plants, including large-scale facilities in five towns across the region.

Most agricultural collectives abandoned money completely within the organisation. Some established warehouses, where members took what they needed, with records of what was taken kept as a guide for planning production. Some agreed a set amount of goods for each family. Many established their own coupon system based on the family wage, with the amount varying according to family size. All introduced rationing of goods if they became scarce, when those in most need (children, elderly, pregnant women, etc.) were given priority treatment.

Facilities in towns and villages were upgraded, with investments made in local collective industries such as bakeries, construction and carpentry, ironwork, etc. As in the urban collectives, health care and education was introduced and made free. Great importance was attached to culture and knowledge as a liberating force and an instrument of struggle in anarcho-syndicalism (see Unit 15). Every collective introduced schools and nurseries for children (most also provided free education for children outside the collective system), and many went well beyond this basic provision. The Amposta collective organised classes for semi-literate adults, kindergartens and a school of art and professions. Graus organised a print library, a school of fine arts and a museum. In Levant, Castille, Andalusia and Extremadura, where illiteracy had stood at 70% prior to the Revolution, programmes ensured that it was soon eliminated. A University was established in Valencia available to all members of the National Federation of Peasants.

As in the urban areas, individual agricultural collectives came together to form regional organisations to co-ordinate regional scale production. Let us now turn to how these regional federations worked in practice, using the Peasant Federation of Levant as an example.

The Levant Regional Federation covered an area containing 78% of Spain's most fertile land. The total population was 3.3 million, of which 45% were organised into some 900 collectives. The Levant collectives had to struggle constantly against the Republican Government in Valencia, which used police and assault guards and eventually tanks and soldiers to prevent the land from being collectivised, protecting all the landlords who expressed sympathy for the Republicans. This repression checked the spread of collectives, which were more extensive in areas such as Aragon, where anarcho-syndicalist militias protected them.

A regional committee administered the Levant collectives, which was subject to recall. This was in turn broken down into broad administrative sectors; food industries, which included crops, wine, etc.; non-agricultural industries, including manufacturing, clothing, packaging, etc.; commerce, which included imports, exports and transport facilities; and public health and education, which included medical care, schools, cultural initiatives, etc. Thus, production was co-ordinated throughout the region. For example, if a local collective wanted to build a fruit juice factory, it would approach the appropriate industrial sector of the federal committee. Fruit juice production would be reviewed to assess supply and demand, estimates of raw materials available would be made, and trends in consumption would be calculated. If it appeared viable, a plan would be drawn up in conjunction with the collective, and the factory built. If the plan was rejected, reasons would be given, and grievances could be pursued through the democratic structures of the Regional Federation.

The Levant Federation was subdivided into 54 local and district federations, all run on the recallable delegate system. Each local centre organised panels of technicians, accountants and bookkeepers, as well as an agriculturist, a veterinarian, a specialist on plant disease, an architect and an engineer. These specialists drew up plans with workers both locally and for the region as a whole. An irrigation plan was drawn up and put into practice, and a large number of irrigation canals were excavated and wells sunk. In Villajoyosa, a single large dam was constructed, which enabled a

Life in Aragon

million almond trees to be cultivated. Housing, sanitation and roads were maintained and modernised, and several schools of agriculture were established, including a centre for the study of plant diseases and tree culture. It is worth noting here that, while they embraced new ideas and expert advice, the anarcho-syndicalists were very sensitive to the dangers of bureaucratic organisation emerging. Tight controls were kept over the specialised inputs, and experts always worked with delegates from the workplace. Regular meetings were held in order that workers could have direct input into plans being drawn up.

The Levant Federation produced over 50% of Spain's total orange crop, some 4 million kilos, and 50% of Spain's total rice production. Most of the surplus produce was exchanged or sold through its own distribution service or that organised by the CNT. Information from each district was passed to a regional information centre, ensuring a detailed record was kept of the Levant collective economy, through which future planning could be conducted. The Federation was also a major supplier of food to the militia on the Aragon front, as well as to anti-fascist fighters in Madrid. On top of this, many local collectives donated food directly. The Levant Collectives also took in an increasing number of refugees fleeing from fascism, all of whom were welcomed, supplied and treated equally.

The region of Aragon contained the longest standing and most vigorously fought front line in the civil war, where the anarcho-syndicalists were lined up face to face against the fascists (see Unit 17). However, Aragon was also home to the most highly collectivised communities of the Revolution, through the Aragon Federation of Collectives. With a population of 500,000 and a strong anarcho-syndicalist tradition, some 433,000 of these people organised themselves into 500 collectives.

Following the same organisational pattern as Levant, all the agricultural collectives were voluntarily started at local village level, and within months (by February 1937) these had organised themselves into district federations and then into the regional federation to better co-ordinate production and distribution. District committees gathered economic statistics for their area to assist the regional federation in its task. Money was abolished and replaced with a standard coupon based on the family wage. Equipment and materials for production were pooled and freely available within and between collectives as needed.

In the spirit of experimentation and mutual aid, many initiatives were taken to increase and improve output. The collectives integrated their work, for example by co-ordinating and pooling labour during harvesting. Experimental farms and technical schools were set up, and a technical team toured the region to assist in improving working and living conditions and production.

Amidst the drive to revolutionise and improve work and its products, there was also considerable attention paid to culture, social development and public services. A section was dedicated to free public education, and the regional federation promoted various plans to advance education and culture. Each collective established adult education and seminar discussion groups, along with night schools. They also planned excursions and days out on a village (collective) level, while district and regional facilities, such as cinemas and theatres, were funded by the individual collectives through district or regional bodies.

The village of Calanda had a population of 4,500, of which 3,500 were in the CNT. As elsewhere, money was abolished, and basics such as food, housing, building repairs, water, gas, electricity, medicines, medical care and schooling were all freely available. Other more 'luxury' items were also free but more likely to be rationed

when in short supply. Clothing was in plentiful supply, due to exchange agreements with textile mills in Barcelona. The cinema was collectivised, as were all the shops.

Teams worked the surrounding land, each choosing a (recallable) delegate to a general committee to co-ordinate collective production. A village committee was elected to administrate village life. The few who did not wish to belong to the collective had their own land and freely exchanged their goods with the collective.

In northern Aragon, Graus had no strong anarcho-syndicalist tradition. Despite this, collectivisation took hold. With a population of 2,600, Graus was a small town centred on an important transport junction, making it a trading centre in what had been an isolated region prior to the Revolution. The small CNT membership on the anti-fascist committee argued immediately for social reforms. Duly, a social wage was introduced and money was replaced with a coupon system. Commercial markets were replaced with co-operative communal markets. Some 23 textile and haberdashery shops came together to form a single market, as did 30 retail food shops and 4 bakeries. Much of the land was collectivised, and transportation came under joint control of the workers' unions (CNT and UGT). Production rocketed by 50% in some sectors, while the retirement age was lowered to 60. Innovations ensured local collective supplies, for example, a new process allowed oil residues to be turned into soap. Housing and health were free, and a school of fine art was established for singing, sculpture, painting and pottery, etc. Land in a former large private estate was turned into a recreation area.

In Binefor (population 5,000), 700 out of the 800 local families joined the collectives, which covered both agriculture and industry. As one member noted at the time, the administrative committees of the village were all linked "like the gears of a machine". Bread, oil, flour, potatoes, meat, vegetables and wine were distributed freely normally and rationed when necessary. Electricity and telephones were installed as part of a regional plan. Commodities not distributed free were paid for in a local currency. Wages were equalised and health, housing and education were became free.

In Muniesa (population 1,700), the commune was organised at a general meeting of all villagers. Most foods were distributed freely in the village centre, where villagers deposited their produce. Commodities not available locally were bought in through the

communal council. It was decided that supplementary goods should be paid for individually, and the council printed a local currency not usable outside the village, which was distributed at a standard rate of one peseta per person per day (each child got half a peseta).

The agricultural collective experiment was at least as successful as those in the urban areas. Today, the usual arguments against such communal ownership are that no one will bother to work, they will over-consume, that motivation, initiative and development will stagnate. These problems only arise where the process is forced and a state, government or political party is controlling decision-making. None of this happened in the anarcho-syndicalist collectives. Since people did it voluntarily, made their own decisions, knew that they were in control, and were imbued with a wider anarcho-syndicalist culture, they didn't even consider cheating the system - that would have meant stealing from themselves. While excess consumption, such as people getting permanently drunk, did not occur, enterprise and initiative did - on a scale never seen before. Even money was largely dispensed with, as goods were exchanged and accumulation of wealth was discouraged. No inflation took place and no interest was paid, and where it was found necessary, money became merely a neutral means of exchange.

Money

The role of money in the Spanish collectives movement is worthy of particular attention. The idea of the anarcho-syndicalists to abolish money in its present form is one of those most likely to raise cries of “impossible, can’t be done”. With the collective movement fresh in the mind, perhaps some of the myths around the issue can be dispelled.

Anarcho-syndicalists are against money because it ensures the continuance of inequality. Capitalists use it to store value taken from the labour of workers in the form of profit. However, money, like most devices of capitalism, performs several functions and some of them are indeed useful. For example, anarcho-syndicalists recognise the need for some form of **common measurement** of value. In the collectives, a uniform standard was established for the exchange of a huge variety of dissimilar goods and services, and great emphasis was placed on the gathering of statistics on values, demand and consumption, with even the smallest transactions being recorded. The importance of such statistics cannot be underestimated. To plan and regulate the economy, and have the flexibility to respond to demand and predict trends, the collection and analysis of such information is crucial. While it may be argued that the agricultural collective economies were relatively simple by today’s standards, the principles of successful collective economic management remain the same, and there are now much more sophisticated forms of technology and analysis to assist in the task.

In the collectives, information was gathered by first setting a local common unit of measurement, for example, rationing books, coupons, local currency, etc. However, this only worked locally, so records were also kept in pesetas for the purpose of wider trade. This was seen as a temporary measure and, within months, discussions were underway to establish a common unit of measurement for the entire movement. For example, the Aragon Regional Federation began replacing the local currencies with a standard uniform ration book for the whole region.

Another important role of money is in **distributing goods and services** appropriately amongst the population. The aim of the anarcho-syndicalist economy is to establish economic equality. The best way to achieve this is by free access to goods and services as needed. The complexity here, however, is agreeing ‘need’, and to what extent all goods and services can be freely accessible. In all

societies, rationing of goods and services takes place, according to the available resources. Under capitalism, the rationing is unequal; under anarcho-syndicalism, it is equal. Therefore, for democratic rationing to work after an anarcho-syndicalist revolution, some form of common exchange will be needed to ensure equal access to scarce goods and services. This was what happened in the Spanish collectives.

A third useful part money plays is as a form of **credit or stored value**. This is a source of inequality on an individual level, but can be accomplished through a collective form of banking system. Many Spanish collectives set up such a system, with a non-profit bank to regulate trade, issue credit and act as a value clearing house. Unlike in a capitalist bank, whose main aim is to issue and receive credit on the basis of interest or some other form of profit, the collective bank is merely a means of directing society’s wealth where it is most needed and can best be used. The role of the banks within the Spanish Revolution was summarised by a contemporary as follows:

“...widespread and complex transitions made it necessary for the Federation of Levant to establish its own bank. The bank, through its federated branches, co-ordinated the exchange and sale of products within Republican Spain and regulated all matters pertaining to foreign trade. The Federation’s bank was, of course, administered by the Bank Workers’ Union. In the Central Labour Bank of Catalonia, organised in 1937, cash transactions were reduced to a minimum. Credit was not given in cash. The bank balanced accounts between collectives and arranged credit when needed, not in cash but in exchange of goods and service. It served as a co-ordinating agency.”

An example of the complexity of the transactions undertaken is seen in orange exports within the Valencia region. To cut out capitalism, the CNT set up an organisation to purchase, pack and export oranges. With a network of 270 committees in communities across the region, this organisation clearly needed a common unit of value and a means for storing and distributing such value in order to carry out its work.

Conclusion

Tragically, the Spanish collectives were smashed by Republican troops under communist command (see Unit 17). In many cases, they had existed for barely a year. However, in this short time, not only did they prove that an alternative to the capitalist and state-run economies is possible, they also brought to light the amazing creativity of people, when they are suddenly freed from the drudgery of wage slavery. Today, they remain a brief but telling glimpse into the possibilities of a world free from the twin evils of capitalist and state oppression.

The relevance of the Spanish collectives is greater as we move into the 21st Century than ever before. The failure and collapse of the Soviet Union has now exposed the false foundation on which much of the 20th Century 'revolutionary' movement was built. With the final decline of the Marxist state-run economy idea, we are left at present with rampant capitalism, and apparently little alternative. But capitalism is not the only choice, and the collectives are proof that formulating an alternative social economic system to replace capitalism is possible. The collectives were a huge economic, social and cultural experiment, based on anarcho-syndicalist theory and ideas. As it turned out, the theory worked in practice near-perfectly, despite the problems of war, shortage and opposition from all sides.

The role of money within the anarcho-syndicalist economy merits a book in itself, while the scope and range of the Spanish Collectives has hardly begun to be explored. However, hopefully, this brief introduction provides an insight into how the collectives were established and functioned. While this series of units (15-18) may be a starting point for further reading on the momentous events in Spain in 1936-39, it is also designed to illustrate how the future anarcho-syndicalist socio-economic system can be organised. We could do a lot worse than updating and learning from the Spanish collectives in developing a modern anarcho-syndicalist strategy for re-creating the society of the future. This will be explored in greater detail in Block 4 (Units 19-24).

Key points

- Spain in 1936 was the first and only time anarcho-syndicalist ideas have been applied to the task of organising society on a large scale.
- There were both agrarian *and* industrial collectives, the latter including both small workshops and large scale manufacturing plants.
- The basis of all decision-making in the collectives was the workplace assembly.
- The collectives were federated regionally and on the basis of industry to co-ordinate production.
- Collectivisation of the Barcelona transport system was crucial for the life and productivity of the city.
- The fascist threat hung over the collectives and so a collectivised munitions industry was built from scratch.
- The collectives largely abandoned the use of money.

Checklist

1. What were the main problems faced by the CNT in organising the collectives and the economy?
2. How were the collectives organised?
3. How was investment managed?
4. Was everyone forced to be part of an agricultural collective?
5. How was money replaced in the collectives?

Answer suggestions

1. *What were the main problems faced by the CNT in organising the collectives and the economy?*

The Spanish economy was already in a ramshackle state and in need of enormous improvement. Many areas of the economy were in fascist hands and even in the areas controlled by the republican government the CNT met fervent opposition to the collectivisation of industry and agriculture. There was the constant fascist threat and after the republican government cut off supplies, the need to provide the militias with clothes, food and arms.

2. *How were the collectives organised?*

The basis was the workplace assembly where all decisions were made. Committees were formed to carry out the wishes of the assembly and were recallable at any time. Collectives formed local federations to co-ordinate production in a Local Economic Council and industrial federations that, in turn, formed a National Confederation of Industry and a National Economic Confederation.

3. *How was investment managed?*

Investment for modernising, or even building an industry from scratch, came from the Economic Councils. These were financed by the collectives themselves who pooled their surpluses into the non-profit making Central Labour Bank.

4. *Was everyone forced to be part of an agricultural collective?*

Special provision was made for anyone who did not want to take part in the collective. Those who wished to stay out were allocated land as long as they did not employ labour to farm it.

5. *How was money replaced in the collectives?*

Money was replaced by a local common unit of measurement in the form of ration books and coupons. It was intended that this would be extended to whole regions replacing the peseta entirely.

Suggested discussion points

- How far did the collectives go towards establishing libertarian communism?
- How would modern technology help in such a process today?

Further Reading

The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936-39. Sam Dolgoff (ed.). Black Rose Books, 1974. ISBN 0919 618200. £9.99 -AK-

Probably the best single text on the Spanish revolution (ignore the Bookchin introduction). Contains excellent, detailed, accessible and contemporary accounts of the urban and rural collective movements, including organisation, economics and money, land administration, etc. 'Essential' - if you only buy one book from the course, buy this one!

The Spanish Collectives. Garston Leval. Freedom Press, 1975. ISBN 0900 384115. £8 -AK-

Good, solid, in-depth analysis of the collectives. Provides an excellent illustration of anarcho-syndicalism in practice, and how people responded to the popular collectivisation movement. Excellent.

Anarchist Economics - an alternative for a world in crisis. La Presa. £1. -AK-

Some useful pointers for a world economy based on examples from Spain in 1936-39.

With the Peasants of Aragon. Augustin Souchy. Ed Stamm. £3.95. -AK-

Personal account written from this prominent CNT activist's wanderings amongst the collectives in Aragon in 1936-37. A rare and valuable insight - one for the 'must read' list.

After the Revolution. D A De Santillan. Jura Media. £8.95. -AK-

Santillan was an academic and one of the CNT members who joined the government. Nevertheless, a still-relevant and valuable contribution on anarcho-syndicalist economics and reconstruction in a post-revolutionary society.

Notes: Unusually for periods of revolutionary working class history, there are a number of relatively accessible books on Spain in the 1930s. This is a sample of some of the better ones. Please note, you may find useful sources on the topic of this Unit in the Further Reading sections of any or all of Units 13-18. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK- available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans/offprints).