

## **A New Way of Life is Born in Aragón**

Battles between peasants and fascists broke out in towns and villages throughout Aragón immediately after July 19 1936. In many of the villages the peasants fled to escape the persecution of the fascists. Later, when the antifascist columns entered Aragón from Catalonia and the Levant, the towns and villages were liberated from the Civil Guards and fascists. The peasants returned to their homes. A social transformation then took place that was not equalled anywhere else in Spain for its depth and organisation.

Unlike Catalonia, distribution of land in Aragón did not make for very great extremes of wealth and poverty. The majority of the people were small farmers, tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Sharecroppers worked for the few large landholders, as did the landless day labourers. (Both these groups had to find work in the cities for many months of the year because Mother Earth could not feed them.) The war tended to eliminate even these extremes rather quickly, for, as the popular militia advanced, the large landholders and the fascists fled the region. Very few remained to work with the peasants.

The people of the villages held general town meetings in the public plazas and agreed to expropriate the lands of the fascist landholders. Other land was also

collectivised or turned over to the village. The people agreed to work together in collectives in almost all the liberated communities. Five hundred towns and villages with a population of approximately half-a-million people established collectivism, a type of economy and social system unknown in modern Europe until then. The transformation of private property into a system of collective property was accomplished in a relatively short time and to a surprising degree.

Collectivisation in Aragón constituted a final stage in the transformation of rural life that had been fought for since the start of the Republic in 1931. The agrarian reform offered by the Republic provided no help for the rural proletariat. Very few large landholders were expropriated under the banner of reform. Only the lands belonging to the Church or religious orders were taken over. These were distributed among a relatively small number of peasant families, but the rural masses continued to live in misery.

When the power of reaction was destroyed after July 19 1936, the peasants realised their ideal: collectivisation. Communes also took control of the land in all the towns and villages of Loyalist Spain. But the process of collectivisation did not develop as far anywhere else in Spain as it did in Aragón.

Collectivisation was not ordered by the State or imposed by force as in Russia. The great majority of the peasants supported the ideals of the social revolution. Their goal was to produce collectively and to distribute the product of their labour with justice to all. No one issued a proclamation for a particular type of collectivisation. There were no decrees, no government commissions to

issue orders, no official orientation to direct the peasants. They acted according to their intuitions. An active minority led the way. The ideal of libertarian communism was strong among the peasants. It was stirring to see how the peasants could hit the nail on the head with their clear, humane thinking even though they did not have a great deal of theory or deep knowledge. With the intuition that people have in exceptional times, the rural population went to work to construct a new life.

News of the collectivisation and libertarian communism in Aragón spread throughout the country. But the actual content of collectivist life in Aragón was not known elsewhere in Spain or abroad. A description of how they were organised, how they reached understandings, had not yet been written. The story of the social revolution in Aragón after July 19th was not yet told.

However, what took place in Aragón is of greatest importance to the world socialist movement. More than half-a-million peasants, impelled by necessity, by their misery and their ideals, took destiny into their own hands. Equality, Liberty, Fraternity, the great dreams of the French Revolution, have not yet been realised in the world. They were being realised in Aragón. The peasant was free from political oppression and the exploitation of the great landholders. Liberty was won in battle. Equality was organised. Fraternity lived in the hearts of the people..

## Structure of the Collectives in Aragón

The smallest unit of the collective in Aragón was the work group, usually numbering five to ten members, sometimes more. The group might consist of friends, or the neighbours on a certain street, or a group of small farmers, tenant farmers, or day labourers. When one group finished its work, it would help another group. Everyone was obliged to work. Each group member was given a workers' card. A group would go out to work together led by their delegate, who much of the time worked with his comrades as well as recording the members' work; the collective assigned land to the groups. The tools, machinery, and animals needed for work were the property of the collective. The cultivation of the land assigned to them was the responsibility of the group.

The collective was the free community of labour of the villagers. It was created with the influence of anarchist ideas. The CNT and the FAI (National Confederation of Labour and Iberian Anarchist Federation) held general assemblies in all the villages. Peasants, small farmers and tenant farmers attended. That was how the collectives were born. They took possession of the land and the tools and machinery of the expropriated landholders. The small farmers and tenant farmers who joined the collective brought their tools and equipment. An inventory of all

property and equipment was made. Whoever did not wish to join the collective could keep the land that he could cultivate without hired labour. Each collective proceeded along the following lines of development:

The distribution of land, labour, tools and fruit of their toil was taken care of first. The collective has to be concerned in the first place with the material survival of its members. The product of the fields was brought to a common warehouse; the most important foods were distributed equally among all. Surplus crops were used for trade with other communes or with collectives in the cities. Produce was distributed to the members free of charge. Depending on the wealth of the commune there would be bread and wine. Sometimes bread, meat and other foods were issued without limit and free of charge. Whatever had to be acquired outside of the commune, through barter or purchase from other communes or the cities, or commodities that were in low supply in the commune, were rationed. Everyone, whether able to work or not, received the necessities of life as far as the collective could provide them. The underlying idea was no longer 'a good day's pay for a good day's work', but 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs'.

Herein lay one difference between the peasant collectives in Aragón and the industrial and commercial collectives in Catalonia and other parts of Spain. In industry, labour or production was collectivised. Consumption remained individual. In the peasant collectives consumption as well as production was collectivised. The new system was simple in its basic characteristics, varied in forms of application. The customary compensation was quotas and rationing for things that were scarce, unlimited

distribution of goods that were in abundance. These are the economic forms of libertarian communism.

The District Federation embraced all the local collectives in the district. Ten to twenty communes joined together to form an economic unit. The labour collective in each village sent an exact inventory to the Regional Federation reporting the amount of land, machines, means of transport, harvest, property and merchandise on hand. The District Federation maintained warehouses and marketed the agricultural produce of all the affiliated villages and collectives; products for interchange were sent to the Regional Federation and in some cases to Barcelona. The collectives were able to obtain the goods they needed with the credit built up by the produce they sent to the District. The majority of the District Federations had ample warehouse facilities. The villages were able to obtain what they needed. Everything they needed could be found in the District.

The District Federation was composed of delegates elected by the collectives of the villages. They were responsible for communication and transportation between the villages; they bought new means of transportation, installed additional telephone lines and supported cultural progress in the affiliated villages. The District Federations led the defence against reactionaries and fascists during the first months after July 19th. Local Defence Councils received arms and strategic advice from the District Federation. The District Federation in the Barbastro Zone, Huesca Province, conducted the defence against fascism for nine months. They provided food and all necessary war materials to the militia.

All the District Federations of Aragón belonged to

the Aragón Regional Federation of Collectives. The Committee of this Regional Federation was the economic centre of the entire region. During the first months there was a certain amount of duplication. The Aragón Defence Council assumed responsibility for defence at the beginning. The Defence Council was recognised by the Government as the official representative body of the region. It had the characteristics of a governmental body. Actually, there was no Defence Council, only an Economic Council.

A Congress of District Federations was held in Caspe in February 1937. They agreed to make the Regional Federation the economic centre of the agricultural collectives of Aragón. The District Federations would send their produce or other goods to the Regional Federation. The interchange of goods between sections of Aragón could be done through the Regional federation. Where necessary, there would be transactions with other regions or other countries.

This, briefly, was the structure of the collectives of Aragón. Following is our report of what we saw in some of the villages, the District Federations and the Regional Federation on how the new economy functioned on a foundation of equality and justice.

Collectivism was not new in Spain. Nor was it limited to Aragón. However, it was most widespread in Aragón. The CNT and the anarchists were the most fervent supporters of collectivisation, but not the only ones. The members of the UGT (General Union of Workers – Socialist) also favoured collectivisation in the city and the country. Spanish anarcho-syndicalism was the main spark and inspiration of the idea and the movement. The

socialist and syndicalist unions worked together frequently, with equal zeal for collectivisation in the rural areas. Collectivisation spread steadily in the villages and towns of the region.

A Congress of all the unions of Aragón was held in Caspe, February 22, 1937. It was called by the CNT, but the UGT in Aragón also participated. The spirit of this great movement crystallised at the Congress. The resolution expressing this follows:

Understanding that the program of the two signatory organisations cannot be realised for the moment, particularly if we take into account the diversity of programs of the different sectors of the antifascist front, and recognising that any attempt to implant a particular type of economic and political system would be suicidal and fatal for the struggle we support, the CNT and the UGT accept the following bases for unity of action:

- 1) We undertake to fulfil all the orders of the legitimate government of the Spanish Republic and the Council of Aragón in which our respective organisations are represented, using all our influence and resources for this purpose.

- 2) A Regional Coordinating Commission will be established within eight days after this agreement has been signed; it will promote unity of action, resolve conflicts that may arise between the two organisations in view of the lamentable divisions between us until now and eliminate elements who may have infiltrated into



our organisations.

The Coordinating Commission will establish its internal organization with comrades of both organisations from the three provinces to facilitate the resolution of conflicts.

The Regional Coordinating Commission will determine with which of the two union federations new unions shall affiliate according to the facts presented.

We reject all force to compel an individual to belong to one or the other union.

The Aragón provincial secretaries of the Spanish Federation of Agricultural Workers of the UGT undertake the study of the structure of the Regional Federation of Collectives of the CNT as quickly as possible in accordance with resolutions adopted by their Congress to create a single organization to strengthen agriculture in Aragón.

The Regional Confederation of Labour (CNT) and the General Union of Workers (UGT) state that the seizure of properties of fascist elements be declared legal, whether they be in agriculture, in the cities or in industry, and that the properties shall be transferred to Municipal Councils which will place them at the disposition of labour organisations to be collectivised. Both organisations support the disposition of such properties made by the Council of Aragón.

Both organisations will respect decisions reached freely by the peasants to administer

themselves as they wish and the unions can campaign for the spread of collectivisation pointing out the advantages of this form of organization. The CNT and the UGT will assist and stimulate freely organised collectives which can serve as examples for other workers and peasants

This was the pact of the two organisations. The UGT was on record in favour of collectivisation. The pact was limited to Aragón only. The national organisations of the CNT and the UGT did not reach an agreement on collectivisation of the land throughout Spain. The CNT wanted socialisation through collectivisation; the UGT preferred nationalisation. This was to be limited to large properties. The large landed estates would be expropriated and transferred to the State. Production and consumption in the villages were not changed, and continued with its capitalist disorder. Small private property and individual cultivation of the land was not changed.

The Socialist and the Communist Party also failed to support collectivisation. The agrarian program of both parties followed the agrarian reform of the Republic. None of their proposals went beyond the official agrarian reform program, which was limited to the distribution of the large landed estates. Agricultural workers must be made small property owners. France did this during the Great Revolution. Result: a nation of small farmers, a social class that bears the seed of capitalism and conservatism.

The Communist Party advocated the creation of agricultural cooperatives instead of a program of collectivisation. They published a set of model by-laws for

such agricultural cooperatives in their publication, *la Voz del Campo* (Voice of the Country), May 22, 1937, Valencia. They did not speak of collectivisation. They based their proposal for cooperatives on private property. This was in contrast with the program of forced collectivisation of the peasants in Russia, an ambiguous position for the Communist International.

Cooperatives could satisfy Spain's peasants as little as the government's program of agrarian reform. Both kept private property as the basis for farming. Agricultural workers went beyond such petty-bourgeois reforms after July 19th, without waiting for the political parties. They were inspired with the ideal of communism, filled with a deep desire for liberty. They wanted nothing of the private economy of capitalism. They wanted to work together collectively and distribute the product of their labour to all justly. They believed that they could achieve this goal with collectives. They went beyond all halfway solutions, all superficial reforms. Collectivism was the principle of libertarian communism. The individual peasant clinging stubbornly to his piece of private property was not their ideal. The collective was the centrepiece for the birth of the new society. It triumphed over individualism. Collectivism was to be the cradle for the rebirth of Spain.

[Souchy's description of the new society developing in the towns and villages of Aragón was written in the present tense as a report of what was taking place in '37. To appreciate the dramatic impact of his book when it was published while the Civil War was still going on, I have retained his report as he wrote it in the present tense. *Translator A.B.*]