

When the CGT did humanitarian work: Spanish children evacuated to France (1936–1939)

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The French labor movement determinedly led the efforts to evacuate and receive Spanish children in France during the Spanish Civil War. The committee set up by the French General Confederation of Labor (CGT) was responsible for more than 10,000 children: that is, the majority of the 15,000 sent to France without their parents between 1936 and 1939. The aim of this article is to understand the motivations and resources of the involvement of the CGT in a cause that was, at first glance, rather remote from its agenda. It shows that this issue arrived at the right moment for a specific sector within the CGT, grouped around the secretary-general, which used child aid to offset the growing communist hold on the Aid Spain movement. The CGT then set up a reception network by converting the resources, practices, and structures of the labor movement. However, as its work relied on the insecure resources of the working class, this relief action was at risk in the event of an economic downturn or a political backlash, and could not withstand the repression that hit the French working class after the general strike of November 1938. The case of the CGT's child aid scheme thus shows the advantages and limitations of humanitarian action, specifically when it is not carried out by a humanitarian organization.

On January 13, 1937, in the middle of the night, an unusual scene was taking place in the border town of Port-Vendres, in the French department of Pyrénées-Orientales.² In the six months since the military coup d'état of July 18,

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1. Translator's note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

2. The ideas presented here have been discussed on many occasions and in various formats: At the "Guernica, Picasso et l'Espagne franquiste (1936–1981)" seminar hosted by the Musée national Picasso-Paris and the Labex CAP-Création, Arts, Patrimoines, organized by Émilie Bouvard and Géraldine Mercier at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art in Paris in February 2016; at the "Warriors without Weapons. Humanitarian Action in the Spanish Civil War and the Republican Exile" conference organized by Sébastien Farré and Dolores Martín Moruno at the University of Geneva in October 2016; and during the "Pyrénées-Orientales, plaque tournante de l'aide aux antifranquistes (1936–1975)" seminar organized in Perpignan on December 15, 2017 by the Pyrénées-Orientales committees of the Association nationale des anciens combattants de la résistance (ANACR) and the Institut d'histoire sociale de la CGT (IHS-CGT). This text also benefitted from the valuable feedback and advice of Samuel Hayat and Marie Piganiol, as well as two anonymous reviewers from *Le Mouvement social*. I would like to warmly thank all of these people. The hypotheses presented here and any errors that remain are my sole responsibility.

1936 had sparked a civil war in Spain, people and goods had been continuously crossing the France-Spain border; this included refugees fleeing fighting and repression, food supplies, clothing, medical supplies sent by solidarity committees, and smuggled arms and ammunition, not forgetting the thousands of volunteers who went to fight with the Republican Army. But on this winter night, between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m., it was a group of 179 children that arrived at the border, comprised of 70 girls and 109 boys originally from Madrid.³ The previous day, Joseph Berta, the secretary-general of the Pyrénées-Orientales Departmental Union (UD)⁴ of trade unions, was already aware that they had left Valencia and he awaited their arrival. Two representatives of the Comité d'accueil aux enfants d'Espagne (CAEE), the Reception Committee for Spanish Children established in November 1936 by the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) (General Confederation of Labor), had come from Paris for the occasion.⁵ The children were taken to the La Mauresque vacation camp, where they were due to spend a few weeks for medical observation, and where the cooks' union served them a light meal. A detailed report of the evening's events was immediately drafted by Joseph Berta and sent to the editors of *Le Peuple*, the official organ of the CGT. Over the following days, the treasurer of the hairdressers' union of Perpignan, "Comrade Genis,"⁶ came to cut the children's hair. Thanks to another "comrade,"⁷ Léon Sors, who had been designated president of the departmental CAEE at the last meeting of the Chamber of Labor,⁸ numerous local supporters had been mobilized, including doctors for medical visits and teachers to enliven communal life. After spending a month in the La Mauresque "transit camp" for medical observation, the children were sent to different volunteer host families in Pyrénées-Orientales, Isère, and Aude, who had applied to the departmental reception committees.⁹ Over the following months, Joseph Berta continued to send articles to *Le Peuple* about the new groups of Spanish children arriving at the Pyrénées-Orientales border.¹⁰ After a few weeks of rest, these children too were sent to host families who had been enlisted across France by the departmental

3. Joseph Berta, "180 enfants de Valence sont accueillis à Perpignan," *Le Peuple. Organe officiel de la Confédération générale du travail* (referred to hereafter as *Le Peuple*), January 15, 1937, 3.

4. The main French trade union center, the Confédération générale du travail (CGT), was organized along two lines: by industry and by department (an administrative division, such as the Pyrénées-Orientales). All CGT trade unions were thus affiliated, on a national level, to an industrial federation, and, on a local level, to a departmental union of trade unions (UD).

5. This refers to Amós Sabrás Gurrea and Luis Rodríguez Guerra, respectively vice-president and president of the Liga Española de los Derechos del Hombre (LEDH) (Spanish Human Rights League), both members of the CAEE in their capacity as delegates of the Spanish Ministry of Health and Social Assistance.

6. This is what is indicated by the caption of the photograph that appeared in *L'Action syndicale. Bulletin officiel de l'Union des syndicats ouvriers de Perpignan et des Pyrénées-Orientales* (referred to hereafter as *L'Action syndicale*), February, 1937. The same photograph was reproduced in *Le Peuple* on February 24, 1937, without the caption.

7. Berta, "180 enfants de Valence," 3.

8. Joseph Berta, "Dans les Pyrénées-Orientales. La réunion mensuelle du Comité général de la Bourse du Travail de Perpignan," *Le Peuple*, December 21, 1936, 4. Léon Sors was secretary-general of the departmental section of the Syndicat national des instituteurs (SNI) (National Teachers' Union).

9. Joseph Berta, "Pour les enfants évacués d'Espagne," *L'Action syndicale*, March 1937, 2.

10. For example, Joseph Berta, "Un nouveau convoi d'enfants d'Espagne est arrivé à Perpignan," *Le Peuple*, February 3, 1937; "Un nouveau convoi d'enfants espagnols arrive à Cerbère," *Le Peuple*, March 8, 1937, 1; "L'exode des enfants espagnols vers la France," *Le Peuple*, March 22, 1937, 2.

committees established by the UD of the CGT, according to the instructions of the confederal leadership.¹¹

Under the stewardship of its main trade union center, the CGT, the French labor movement became massively and determinedly committed to the reception of Spanish children in France. The Reception Committee for Spanish Children (CAEE), created by the CGT in November 1936, together with half a dozen partners within the French Left, was placed largely under its authority. The president of the CAEE was none other than the secretary-general of the CGT, Léon Jouhaux; its secretary-general was Georges Buisson, one of the CGT's six deputy secretaries¹²; and its treasurer was Félix Dupont, who was also the treasurer of the CGT. As increasing numbers of French and international organizations sought to become involved in the housing of Spanish children, it was these men who fought tooth and nail to have the CAEE internationally recognized as the epicenter of the distribution of Spanish children, whether in France or elsewhere.¹³ Although this monopoly would be challenged over time, the fact remains that, from the arrival of the group at Port-Vendres on January 13, 1937, to the groups that left Barcelona for Lyon and Casablanca at the beginning of January 1939,¹⁴ the CAEE had taken charge of more than 10,000 children: that is, the majority of the approximately 15,000 who were evacuated to France in an organized manner without their parents during this period.¹⁵ To this end, the CAEE opened a subscription in December 1936, which reported an impressive amount of money raised. In January 1938, with about 3.5 million francs raised in a year, it was the third biggest appeal for aid to Spain, behind the general subscription of the CGT "in aid of the Spanish people," which

11. Félix Dupont, "Circulaire H. 69 aux UD. Faite à Paris le 19 novembre 1936," *La Voix du peuple. Bulletin officiel de la Confédération générale du travail* (hereafter referred to as *La Voix du peuple*), November 1936, 709–710.

12. The five other deputy secretaries were René Belin, Raymond Bouyer, and Robert Bothereau (*ex-confédérés* [ex-confederates]) and Julien Racamond and Benoît Frachon (*ex-unitaires* [ex-unitaries]). Together with the secretary-general, Léon Jouhaux, and the treasurer, Félix Dupont, an *ex-confédéré*, these men made up the bureau of the CGT.

13. This role was granted to the CAEE at the important international conference "For Aid to the Wounded, Widows, Orphans, and Refugees of Republican Spain," organized by the International Committee of Coordination and Information for Aid to Republican Spain (CICIAER) on January 16–17, 1937 in Paris. See the minutes of the discussions and the circular of the CICIAER containing the final resolution, n.d. [January–February 1937] (La contemporaine, Archives de la LDH (ALDH), F Δ Rés. 798/62, folder 3, f. 19).

14. The sources on the convoys are sometimes cryptic, but according to a note scribbled in pencil on a collective passport for sixty-four children to be housed "in Lyon under a family placement system" ("a Lyon. Régimen familial"), it is indicated that three children left Spain on January 3, 1939 (Archivo general de la administración (AGA) (9) 17.12 51/21124). This date is consistent with what we know about the trajectory of other children on this list, such as Delfina Blanco Sánchez, who arrived at the Freinet school in Vence (not far from Lyon) in early January 1939 (see Delfina Blanco Sánchez, "Nuestro viaje," *Pionniers. Journal mensuel de l'École Freinet*, January 7, 1939). As for the convoy to Casablanca, it was announced for an upcoming date in dispatch no. 2 of Ramón González Sicilia de la Corte, Spanish consul in Casablanca, to Julio Álvarez del Vayo, Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Casablanca, January 4, 1939 (Archivo General del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y de Cooperación [AMAEC], since closed to the public), Fondo Renovado, R. 633/65, f. 9). According to subsequent lists of Spanish children residing in Morocco, it seems that this convoy was safely completed.

15. The figure of 10,000 was estimated by the CGT itself in July 1938 and seems consistent with the other sources available to us. "XXV^e Congrès confédéral de la CGT. Nantes, 14 au 17 novembre 1938. Rapport moral. L'accueil aux enfants d'Espagne," *La Voix du Peuple*, July 1938, 555–557. In the second half of 1938, about 200 additional Spanish children were entrusted to the CAEE, out of about 500 children sent to France during this period.

was launched right after the coup d'état and which financed material aid provided by the French working class (8 million francs by the same date), and right behind the subscription of the Popular Front's Solidarity Commission for the Aid of the Spanish People, which was intended to collect donations from all organizations of the Popular Front apart from the CGT, and which raised about 5 million francs by the same date.¹⁶ At a time when the boats and trucks of food and medical supplies leaving for Republican Spain were rarely given more than a brief article in *Le Peuple*, the CGT launched a communications campaign of an unprecedented scale for the CAEE, with numerous front-page articles, reports, and photographs, as well as speeches on the radio—the new mass-media channel. It also circulated articles and appeals for donations in many Leftist publications such as *L'Œuvre*, *Le Populaire*, *Vendredi*, *Les Cahiers des droits de l'homme*, or the journal of the National Teachers' Union, *L'École libératrice*.

The aim of this article is to understand the motivations and resources of the huge-scale involvement of the CGT in a cause that was not at all straightforward. In fact, the CAEE managed to get professional trade unionists to dedicate themselves to tasks and causes that departed somewhat from their usual forms of action, not only requiring them to take into consideration family placements, schooling, and children's homes, but also the purchase of shoes, outbreaks of measles, cases of "intolerable"¹⁷ children, and the sexuality of young girls.¹⁸ This activity is striking in how different it was from the type of aid that had thus far been provided by the confederal management, which was targeted at assisting as directly as possible Republican Spain in its struggle: shipments of tetanus vaccines, anti-gangrene serums, and bandages for the various fronts¹⁹; food supplies for civilian populations²⁰; a call to customs officers, railway workers, and dockers to block all deliveries to Francoist Spain²¹; active collaboration in "relaxed non-intervention,"²² allowing for the smuggling of military material into Spain; without mentioning the trade union initiatives that took place outside of the confederal management, such as the Parisian steelworkers who raised money for the purchase of fighter planes and ammunition.²³ Moreover, the propaganda surrounding the CAEE was characterized,

16. ALDH, F Δ Res. 798/61, folder 3, f. 102, Information Service of the International Committee of Coordination and Information for Aid to Republican Spain (CICIAER), January 15, 1938. Collections were not so high the following year: the last subscription list published by the CAEE (the 45th) reached a total of 3,778,015.80 francs (*Le Peuple*, April 4, 1939); at the same time, the CGT's general subscription for Republican Spain reached 9 million francs (*Le Peuple*, April 10, 1939).

17. Archives nationales (AN), 20010221/9, inventory 2, folder 3, f. 29, letter from Antonin Albert to Georges Buisson, January 27, 1938.

18. Ibid, f. 267–268, report of the investigation by CAEE inspector Émile Dantard into Angeles and Francisco Fernandez Saiz, December 3, 1937.

19. "Solidarité avec les camarades espagnols. Un nouvel envoi de sérum à Barcelone," *Le Peuple*, August 28, 1936, 1; "Deux envois de la CGT sur le front nord-espagnol," *Le Peuple*, September 3, 1936, 1.

20. "Le gouverneur de Biscaye remercie la CGT," *Le Peuple*, October 8, 1936, 3.

21. "Les dockers d'Alger font la grève. Ils se refusent à ravitailler les troupes rebelles de Franco," *Le Peuple*, December 3, 1936, 3.

22. This is an expression coined by Léon Blum and corresponds to the policy he secretly implemented with certain members of his cabinet. On Léon Jouhaux's investment in "relaxed non-intervention," see Nicolas Lépine, "Le socialisme international et la guerre civile espagnole" (PhD diss., Université de Laval, 2013), 143.

23. "Une initiative hardie des ouvriers des usines de Gnome-et-Rhône," *Le Peuple*, August 6, 1936, 6.

besides its huge scale, by its almost complete break in terms of framing²⁴ with the official position of the CGT on the Spanish Civil War, and with the way in which it justified its other aid work. The confederal leadership had taken up a determined pro-Republican stance from the beginning of the conflict, repeatedly claiming that “the workers of France are not neutral, they are with the people of Spain,”²⁵ presenting the aid offered by the CGT as a type of political and class-motivated “effective solidarity”²⁶ aimed at “helping the Spanish people to victory”²⁷ against international fascism. By contrast, the hosting of Spanish children was almost systematically presented outside of this anti-fascist framing as an act of “pure humanity”²⁸ that should inspire “generosity from all quarters,” “whatever one’s individual tendencies”—a quite ambiguous expression that implied that it was possible to support the CAEE without necessarily campaigning for victory for Republican Spain. How can one explain the commitment of the CGT in a cause so far from its usual sphere of activity, which it decided to present in a way that was so contradictory to its other actions concerning the Spanish Civil War? How did it manage to achieve all the tasks so far removed from its most obvious knowledge and expertise? Under what conditions could the CGT be considered a humanitarian actor in the Spanish Civil War?

Humanitarian aid during the Spanish Civil War occupies a paradoxical place in the historiography. Admittedly, the international resonance and the great movement of solidarity that the conflict inspired, mainly in favor of the Republicans, translated into a volume of material aid not seen since the international food relief campaign to help Russia during the famine of 1921–1923.²⁹ However, aid to Spain occupies a negligible place both in the historiography of the conflict itself, as Helen Graham has recently noted,³⁰ and in the historiography of humanitarian work.³¹ There are certainly a number of factors that contribute to this. First, in terms of the history of the Spanish Civil War, the flamboyant epic of the International Brigades relegated less spectacular forms of aid to the background. Secondly, these humanitarian efforts have perhaps become invisible in the general history of humanitarianism

24. We borrow the notions of “frames” and “framing” from the sociology of social movements, which uses these terms to refer to the way in which the stakeholders in a mobilization assign meaning to their actions. See David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford Jr., Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford. “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986): 464–81.

25. Léon Jouhaux, “Les travailleurs français ne sont pas neutres. Ils sont avec le peuple d’Espagne,” *Le Peuple*, August 4, 1936, 1.

26. Ibid. This term is frequently repeated in every article of *Le Peuple* or every opinion column of one of the members of the bureau, to emphasize the expected effects of a relief effort that must not remain symbolic, but that must actually shift the balance of power in favor of the Republican side.

27. Ibid.

28. “La CGT à la radio. L’accueil aux enfants d’Espagne,” *Le Peuple*, December 23, 1936, 2.

29. On this subject, see Linda Mahood and Vic Satzewich, “The Save the Children Fund and the Russian Famine of 1921–23: Claims and Counter-Claims about Feeding ‘Bolshevik’ Children,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 22, no. 1 (2009): 55–83; Carl-Emil Vogt, “Fridtjof Nansen et l’aide alimentaire européenne à la Russie et à l’Ukraine bolcheviques en 1921–1923,” *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps* 51, no. 3 (2009): 5–12.

30. Helen Graham, “Foreword” in Gabriel Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), xiii–xv.

31. For example, there is not a single line devoted to the Spanish Civil War in the only summary book currently available: Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (London and Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

due to the limited involvement of organizations specialized in the provision of aid, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, Save the Children, and the Save the Children International Union,³² who tend to be the main actors of this historiography and who define its perimeters. Their relative absence can be explained in part by a voluntary withdrawal in the face of an over-politicized conflict that ran the risk of damaging their hard-earned reputation of strict neutrality and apoliticism, or even of shattering their fragile internal unity, as demonstrated by Emily Baughan in the case of Save the Children and the Save the Children International Union.³³ In fact, the provision of aid to Spain between 1936 and 1939 was largely due to ad hoc committees formed by groups and political parties belonging to the anti-fascist movement, and it went hand in hand with the overtly pro-Republican discourse that called for an end to the policy of non-intervention and for the right of Republican Spain to be freely supplied with arms. For this reason, studies on the Aid Spain movement fall much more within the history of political involvement and of Popular Fronts at the end of the 1930s than in the history of humanitarian aid.³⁴ When Spain is nevertheless considered in histories of humanitarianism, there is a separation in the literature between aid given by so-called “neutral” organizations on the one hand and “anti-fascist solidarity” on the other.³⁵ The latter is usually considered “façade humanitarianism”³⁶ precisely because its humanitarian practices were not accompanied by a corresponding ideological neutrality: “these organizations are not neutral, and they express this vocally.”³⁷ The case of the CAEE thus allows for the focus to be shifted in order to pose a new question: what were the motives that caused a non-humanitarian organization like the CGT, which was incidentally very much involved in the campaign to end the policy of non-intervention and which supported the Republican camp, to get involved in an activity that it almost systematically presented as neutral? What were the effects on the reception of children of this activity being supported and implemented by a trade union center and not by an organization specialized in humanitarian work?

In order to answer these questions, this article proceeds in four sections. The first looks at the reasons why, in the fall of 1936, the Ligue des droits de l’homme (LDH) (French Human Rights League) requested the CGT to take up the management of the housing of Spanish children in France. The second shows that this

32. Contrary to what one would be led to believe by the works of Pierre Marqués, *La Croix-Rouge pendant la guerre d’Espagne (1936–1939). Les missionnaires de l’humanitaire* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000); Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief*. We would like to thank Sébastien Farré, who is well-versed in the Geneva archives of these organizations, for this clarification.

33. Emily Baughan, “Saving the Children: British Humanitarianism in Europe and Africa, c. 1915–1945” (PhD diss., University of Bristol, 2014), 226–234.

34. To cite only the most important studies, this is the case of Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014 [2002]); Eric R. Smith, *American Relief Aid and the Spanish Civil War* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2013). In the different context of British India, we still find this indissoluble mixture of political (anti-colonial) activism and humanitarian aid, as Maria Framke shows, “Political Humanitarianism in the 1930s: Indian Aid for Republican Spain,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire* 23, no. 1–2 (2016), 63–81.

35. Discussed in two separate chapters of Sébastien Farré, *Colis de guerre: Secours alimentaire et organisations humanitaires (1914–1947)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 87–119.

36. Axelle Brodriez, *Le secours populaire français 1945–2000. Du communisme à l’humanitaire* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2006), 13.

37. Ibid., 37.

project immediately appealed to some sections of the CGT because it was perceived as an opportunity to mobilize the pacifist and non-communist Left, which had until then been little involved with regard to Spain. The third section describes the way in which the resources mobilized by the CGT for the CAEE shaped the reception of the children from Spain on the ground. The fourth and final section sheds light on the repercussions on the CAEE of the difficulties experienced by the CGT following the dissolution of the Popular Front, by retracing the steps of its demobilization and its gradual withdrawal from the cause of the Spanish children.

Better the CGT than Red Aid: The elective affinities of the LDH

The CAEE came into being between mid-October and the first week of November 1936, during talks in Paris between Spanish and French activists belonging to three organizations: the Liga Española de los Derechos del Hombre (LEDH) (Spanish Human Rights League), the LDH, and the CGT. In all likelihood, the committee was created almost by chance, or at least without any premeditation. The archives of the three organizations at its origin are unfortunately of little help in retracing the process of its creation. It turned out to be impossible to locate the LEDH archives in Spain,³⁸ and those of the LDH and the CGT³⁹ do not have any information predating the actual launch of the committee on November 7, 1936.⁴⁰ Even after this date, the CAEE records have many gaps.⁴¹ Therefore, no document discovered to date gives a direct report on the motivations for the involvement of the CGT. Thanks to some police reports, to the archives of the French Communist Party (PCF) and International Red Aid,⁴² and to the bulletins and periodicals of the organizations concerned, it is nevertheless possible to attempt a hypothetical reconstruction of the history of the birth of the CAEE. To achieve this, its birth should be placed in the organizational field of the French Left and in the context of the Aid Spain movement, within both of which it was situated.⁴³

It all began with the arrival in France on October 13, 1936 of a delegation of the Spanish league, which came hoping to cause a breach in the policy

38. There are only a few thin folders at the Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica (CDMH) in Salamanca and the records of only one section, that of Valladolid. On the LEDH, see Luis P. Martín, “‘En defensa de la República’. Masonería y derechos humanos en Castilla y León (1912–1936),” *Investigaciones Históricas* 18 (1998): 249–272; José Antonio Ayala, “Revolución, derechos humanos y masonería: las ligas españolas de derechos del hombre (1913–1936),” in José Antonio Ferrer Benimeli (ed.), *Masonería, revolución y reacción. Actas del IV Symposium Internacional de Historia de la Masonería Española. Alicante, September 27–30, 1989* (Alicante: Instituto de Cultura Juan Gil-Albert, 1990), 123–143.

39. For reasons that are difficult to clarify, the CAEE archives, which returned from Russia in the early 2000s, are partly located at the IHS-CGT in Montreuil, under the classification 97 CFD 45 and 46, and partly at the AN, in the records of the Commission d’aide aux enfants espagnols réfugiés en France, under the classification 20010221/9, inventory 2, files 2 and 3.

40. ALDH, F Δ Res. 798/62, folder 1, letter from Félix Dupont, CGT treasurer, to the LDH, Paris, November 7, 1936.

41. For example, the CAEE records contain no minutes of meetings and virtually no record of exchanges between the committee’s member organizations.

42. Reproduced versions of these Russian records were consulted at the Maison des sciences de l’homme in Dijon, thanks to the PAPRIK@2F project.

43. This approach is much inspired by that proposed by Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel, *Consommateurs engagés à la Belle Époque. La Ligue sociale d’acheteurs* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2012), chapter 2 in particular.

of non-intervention.⁴⁴ The delegation was made up of Luis Rodríguez Guerra, Amós Sabrás Gurrea, and Alberto Lumbreras y Gasel, respectively president, vice-president, and secretary-general of the LEDH. The three men planned to spend a month between Paris and London to meet French and English league activists. They hoped to persuade them to take an official position against non-intervention and to put pressure on their governments. Their trip took place just as the Siege of Madrid began, which many felt would prove decisive. In this context, many Spanish politicians, both male and female, were traveling across democratic Europe to condemn non-intervention to their French, British, or Belgian counterparts, sometimes successfully.⁴⁵ This is exactly what Alberto Lumbreras undertook during the Central Committee meeting of the LDH on October 18, 1936, powerfully attacking the “deception”⁴⁶ of “so-called neutrality.” But his speech would ignite a heated debate within a league where the majority supported the policy of non-intervention.

In all likelihood, it was in this disappointing context for the Spanish league leaders that they suggested another, theoretically less controversial, idea to their French counterparts as a fallback solution: to organize in France a scheme to house the children of Spanish Republicans. One can imagine that this proposal won over the president of the French league, Victor Basch, who was very active in the movement in support of the Republic. But the LDH, a legal support and advocacy organization, was not equipped to manage such a large-scale undertaking.⁴⁷ It could at best be a partner.

When Victor Basch decided to call on the CGT—until then absent from the talks—to lead the committee that would be created for this purpose, it was by no means the obvious choice. In fact, there was a pre-existing structure that had taken up the same mission: the Comité central d'hébergement des enfants d'Espagne (Central Committee for the Accommodation of Spanish Children). This committee had been established in August 1936 by the Association nationale du soutien de l'enfance (National Association for the Support of Children), a new association whose fragile existence was closely dependent on the PCF.⁴⁸ For months, this committee had been struggling in vain to obtain the agreement of the Spanish

44. AN, 19940492/193, folder 17392 “Rodriguez, Luis,” copy of the Préfecture de police de Paris report on the three Spanish delegates of the LEDH, November 1936.

45. To give just one example, in early October, two leaders of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, Luis Jiménez de Asúa and Isabel de Palencia, attended the British Labour Party Conference. Against all odds, they managed to win over the audience “with their impassioned speeches,” forcing the Labour Party to adopt a resolution demanding that the government investigate violations of the non-intervention pact by Germany and Italy. Nicolas Lépine, “Le socialisme international,” 46.

46. “Comité Central. Extraits. Séance plénière du 18 octobre 1936 (1),” *Cahiers des droits de l'homme*, November 30, 1936, 780.

47. Regarding the role of Victor Basch in the national and international movement of aid to Spain and the choice of the LDH to not take charge of housing the Spanish children in France, we would like to refer to Célia Keren, “Les défis de la solidarité internationale. La collaboration entre la Ligue des droits de l'homme et la Confédération générale du Travail au sein du Comité d'accueil aux enfants d'Espagne (1936–1939),” in Olivier Dard and Nathalie Sévilla (eds.), *Le phénomène ligueur en Europe et aux Amériques* (Metz: Presses universitaires de Metz, 2011), 269–286.

48. “Il faut assurer le gîte et la nourriture aux petits enfants d'Espagne! Constituez partout des comités locaux d'hébergement!” *L'Humanité. Organe central du Parti communiste (SFIC)* (hereafter *L'Humanité*), August 22, 1936, 7; Michel Onof, “Mes impressions de délégation,” *Tribune de l'enfance. Organe mensuel de l'Association nationale de soutien de l'enfance*, October 15, 1936, 4. The Association nationale de soutien de l'enfance is the heir to the French section of Willi Münzenberg's Workers International Relief, dissolved by the Communist International in 1935 to better promote International

government to bring Spanish children to France, with the support of, or even on the instructions of, the Secours rouge de France (SRF) (French Red Aid) and the Central Committee of the PCF.⁴⁹ Victor Basch could not ignore these initiatives, particularly as the Central Committee for the Accommodation of Spanish Children was placed under the auspices of the Popular Front's Solidarity Commission for the Aid of the Spanish People, which was created on July 31, 1936 in order to coordinate and unify the support of the French Left, and of which he was himself president, in the name of the league.⁵⁰

All this leads to the conclusion that it was precisely in order to circumvent the pre-existing structure of the aid movement for Republican Spain, and in particular the communist organizations omnipresent therein, that Victor Basch decided to call on the CGT. In fact, the SRF had a growing, or even dominant, position within the Popular Front's Solidarity Commission. Although it was not one of the ten founding organizations of the French Popular Front coalition, it obtained the secretariat-general and the headquarters of its Solidarity Commission and it was responsible for publishing the results of its subscription in its weekly journal, *La Défense*, even though the treasury was at the LDH.⁵¹ Whether in the columns of its journal or in Aid Spain meetings, the SRF relentlessly boasted about being "at the forefront everywhere"⁵² in the effort in support of the Spanish Republic. This activism corresponded to a strategy of the Communist International (Comintern), which hoped to benefit from the popular support for the Spanish Republic in order to transform Red Aid into a mass movement occupying the entire field of Leftist solidarity.⁵³ For this, the Comintern sought to achieve an organic merger of the SRF and the LDH, by arguing for the reunification of the communist and non-communist Lefts within the Popular Front.⁵⁴ In spite of Victor Basch's refusal,⁵⁵ the SRF took advantage of its Central Committee meeting of October 31 and November 1, 1936 to advise the merger, as part of the integration of the entire voluntary sphere of the Left involved in the fields of justice and mutual aid, under the aegis of an SRF which then changed its name to "Secours populaire de France et des colonies" (SPF) (Popular Aid of

Red Aid. See Lucien Mercier, "Le Secours ouvrier international en France," in José Gotovitch and Anne Morelli (eds.), *Les solidarités internationales. Histoire et perspectives* (Bruxelles: Labor, 2003), 47.

49. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), papers of the International Red Aid, 539/3/1235, f. 27–28 and 31–32, 36, minutes of the SRF secretariat meeting, September 21, 1936; minutes of the meetings of the sous-commission de solidarité aux réfugiés d'Espagne (Sub-Committee on Solidarity with Spanish Refugees), September 22 and October 16, 1936.

50. "Appel pour l'aide au peuple espagnol. Il faut un million avant le 15 août," *L'Humanité*, August 5, 1936, 3.

51. Ibid.

52. Samy Carasso, "Pour une solidarité plus large et plus efficace en faveur des républicains d'Espagne. Une conférence de quelques sections nationales du Secours Rouge International," *La Défense. Organe de la solidarité, de la justice et de la liberté* (hereafter *La Défense*), August 28, 1936, 2.

53. Claudio Natoli, "Pour une histoire comparée des organisations communistes de solidarité. Le Secours ouvrier international et le Secours rouge international," in José Gotovitch and Anne Morelli (eds.), *Les solidarités internationales. Histoire et perspectives* (Bruxelles: Labor, 2003), 25.

54. In addition to the reunification of the trade union movement that took place in France, it should be recalled that discussions were then under way in several countries concerning the reunification of socialist and communist parties, as well as their respective Internationals.

55. "Comité Central. Extraits. Séance du 21 décembre 1936," *Cahiers des droits de l'homme*, March 1, 1937, 155.

France and the Colonies).⁵⁶ The president of the LDH and its Central Committee, who were resolutely opposed to such a loss of independence and identity, refused outright and repeatedly, and called to order those local sections of the league who were tempted by the rapprochement.⁵⁷ In this context, the relationship between the Secours populaire and the LDH was becoming increasingly strained.⁵⁸ It was therefore almost certainly in order to get out of a tête-à-tête with an SRF/SPF seeking to swallow up the league, and in order to prevent the PCF from controlling the entire sector of solidarity with Spain through its satellite organizations, that Victor Basch called on the CGT.

For the same reason, the president of the LDH did not address just anyone at the CGT because, since the Toulouse Congress in February 1936, the CGT had achieved reunification, thereby bringing together *ex-unitaires* (ex-unitaries)—for the most part communist—and non-communist *ex-confédérés* (ex-confederates).⁵⁹ However, at the confederal bureau, Victor Basch had two trusted allies acting as intermediaries between the LDH and the CGT: Léon Jouhaux, secretary-general, and Georges Buisson, deputy secretary, both *ex-confédérés*. As early as February 6, 1934⁶⁰, they had joined the many initiatives launched by the LDH to block extreme right-wing leagues. They entered the LDH Central Committee at the same time.⁶¹ Since July 1936, the three men also met regularly in the Aid Spain committees.⁶² Although Léon Jouhaux and Georges Buisson did not attend the LDH meeting where the Spanish delegation spoke and therefore had not met Spanish league leaders on that occasion, it is likely that Victor Basch personally approached them in the following days, thereby circumventing the confederal bureau where the *ex-unitaires* were present. Once the CAEE reception committee was officially established, Jouhaux and Basch together assumed the presidency, and the treasury

56. “La résolution adoptée à la Conférence nationale extraordinaire par 150 mandats, 10 avec réserves, 3 contre,” *La Défense*, November 13, 1936, 8.

57. “Pas de fusion avec le secours populaire!,” *Cahiers des droits de l’homme*, December 25, 1936, 818.

58. On the history of the relations between LDH and SRF/SPF, see Sharon Elbaz and Liora Israël, “L’invention du droit comme arme politique dans le communisme français. L’association juridique internationale (1929–1939),” *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 85 (2005): 39–40.

59. After the creation of the PCF in 1920, the French CGT split. Communist union activists created a new organization, the Confédération générale du travail *unitaire* (CGTU), in 1921, and so were commonly called *unitaires*, while those who remained in the former CGT became known as *confédérés*. In the wake of the Popular Front dynamic, the CGT and CGTU reunited in February 1936. The new reunited CGT was thus comprised of former *confédérés* and former *unitaires*, which now formed two tendencies within one organization.

60. On February 6, 1934, far-right leagues organized a street demonstration in Paris, which was felt by many at the time, especially on the left, to have been a (failed) fascist putsch. After this, the divided French left started coalescing into what would become the Popular Front movement and electoral coalition.

61. Emmanuel Naquet, *Pour l’Humanité. La Ligue des droits de l’homme de l’affaire Dreyfus à la défaite de 1940* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 535–538.

62. In addition to the meetings in which all three regularly participated, Georges Buisson was a member of the Popular Front’s Solidarity Commission, chaired by Victor Basch. He was also a member of the Executive Committee of the International Committee of Coordination and Information for Aid to Republican Spain, the CICAER, co-chaired by Paul Langevin and Victor Basch, and in the creation of which Léon Jouhaux actively participated (see “À l’hôtel Lutetia une grande conférence européenne pour la défense de la démocratie espagnole s’est réunie hier,” *Le Peuple*, August 14, 1936, 1–3; and the press release of the CICAER “Pour l’aide à l’Espagne républicaine” *Le Peuple*, October 4, 1936, 5).

was entrusted to Félix Dupont, treasurer of the CGT.⁶³ Georges Buisson, appointed secretary-general, became the main project manager.

Within the CGT, the men involved in the CAEE thus had an easily identifiable profile: *ex-confédérés*, they belonged to the so-called “centrist” tendency of the CGT, led by secretary-general Léon Jouhaux. Georges Buisson and Félix Dupont also shared the fact that they were the only two members of the confederal bureau who belonged to the socialist party, Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière (SFIO) (French Section of the Workers’ International), to which Léon Jouhaux was ideologically close⁶⁴ and of which Victor Basch was also a member. United with the *ex-unitaires* on foreign policy, uncompromising in the fight against fascism, and opposed to non-intervention in Spain, the CGT centrists were eager to maintain the line of unity from the Toulouse Congress. They nevertheless harbored “strong suspicions”⁶⁵ about *ex-unitaires* regarding the defense of trade union independence faced with the influence of the PCF. This vigilance, however, remained discrete, and, in this respect, the centrists differentiated themselves from the third tendency of the CGT, which, exhibited in the weekly journal *Syndicats* created in October 1936, made the denunciation of the “communist colonization”⁶⁶ of the CGT its central cause. Thus, in addition to their ideological proximity and their relationships of trust with Victor Basch, Léon Jouhaux and his partners at the confederal bureau were all the more likely to be receptive to his approach, since their position was on the whole very close to his: like him, they were loyal to the Popular Front which they had greatly contributed to building and they were eager to maintain links with the communist world, but they were nevertheless concerned about the independence of their organization. In addition, they were also in a prime position to witness the disproportionate role that the SRF/SPF gave itself in the Aid Spain movement.

Mobilizing the pacifist and non-communist left at a distance from the conglomerate

This desire to avoid or counterbalance the communist influence probably explains why none of the prospective partner organizations, at the time of the official creation of the CAEE, were in any way part of the sphere of influence of the PCF. In a letter sent to them on November 7, 1937, the treasurer of the CGT, Félix Dupont, outlined the “Surveillance and Control Committee”⁶⁷ that the confederation wished to form and that would be composed of the “great moral forces of our country.” There

63. Press release “Comité d’accueil aux Enfants d’Espagne,” *Le Peuple*, December 4, 1936, 2.

64. Morgan Poggioli, *La CGT du Front populaire à Vichy. De la réunification à la dissolution, 1934-1940* (Montreuil: Institut d’histoire sociale de la CGT, 2007), 195. It should be recalled that the CGT bureau also had two PCF members, Julien Racamond and Benoît Frachon. The other members had no party affiliation.

65. Michel Dreyfus, *Histoire de la CGT. Cent ans de syndicalisme en France* (Bruxelles: Complexe, 1995), 181.

66. The newspaper *Syndicats. Hebdomadaire du monde du travail* was launched on October 16, 1936. On the strategic modalities of “communist colonization,” see Antoine Prost, *La CGT à l’époque du Front populaire, 1934-1939. Essai de description numérique* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1964), 138 sq.

67. ALDH, F Δ Rés. 798/62, folder 1, letter from Félix Dupont to the LDH, Paris, November 7, 1936. The same letter was sent to the organizations listed in the letter and cited below.

were no political parties or groups of the “communist conglomerate”⁶⁸ among them. The absence of Amsterdam-Pleyel, the Women’s World Committee against War and Fascism, and, of course, the SPF, was all the more obvious given the presence of these organizations at all the Aid Spain meetings and committees.

The list of prospective partners makes it possible to situate the CAEE, as it was imagined by its founders, at the intersection of three quite well-defined spaces. The first is that of moderate and non-partisan Republicanism with, on the one hand, the great historical leagues of the LDH and the Ligue française de l’enseignement (French League of Education) and, on the other hand, the Fédération des Anciens Combattants (Federal Union of Veterans).⁶⁹ This last choice is particularly telling: Félix Dupont preferred to call upon a mass organization of former soldiers which was politically neutral (its leadership would not take sides in the 1936 elections, despite sympathies for the Popular Front) rather than the Mouvement d’action combattante (a smaller, leftist veteran association), which was created in the wake of February 6, 1934, was one of the ten founding members of the National Committee of the Popular Front, and which participated in its Solidarity Commission for the Aid of the Spanish People.⁷⁰ Even if the Federal Union did not end up participating in the CAEE, the CGT’s desire to include it signifies the efforts made to institutionally separate the reception of Spanish children from the established Aid Spain movement and to mobilize groups that had Leftist affinities but that were officially apolitical. The second set of prospective partners corresponds to the labor world outside of the unions: Fédération des Coopératives de Consommation (Federation of Consumer Cooperatives); Fédération des Coopératives de Production (Federation of Production Cooperatives); Fédération des Mutuelles Agricoles (Federation of Agricultural Mutuals); Enfance Coopérative (Children’s Cooperative).⁷¹ Similarly to the first group, these organizations that were quite Leftist and close to the CGT, with which they had collaborated on a number of occasions during the inter-war period, had few connections to the communist world.⁷² The final group is made up of the teaching trade union organizations—the Syndicat national des instituteurs (SNI) (National Teachers’ Union) and the Fédération générale de l’enseignement (General Federation of Teachers)—, where communists were practically nonexistent.⁷³

68. The expression “communist conglomerate,” inspired by the work of Jacques Ion, is used by Axelle Brodriez to characterize the vast group made up of the PCF and its satellites. Brodriez, *Le secours populaire français*, 13–23.

69. ALDH, F Δ Rés. 798/62, folder 1, letter from Félix Dupont to the LDH, Paris, November 7, 1936. By “Fédération des Anciens Combattants,” Félix Dupont is most certainly referring to the Union fédérale des associations françaises d’anciens combattants (Federal Union of French Veterans’ Associations), known as the Union fédérale (Federal Union).

70. Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française, 1914-1939. Vol 1: Histoire* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1977), 171 sq. Antoine Prost points out that in the years 1934–1936, the Federal Union forged links with the CGT’s planning circles. At that time, it had about one million members. On the participation of the Mouvement d’action combattante in the National Committee of the Popular Front, see Frédéric Monier, *Le Front Populaire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 86.

71. ALDH, F Δ Rés. 798/62, folder 1, letter from Félix Dupont to the LDH, Paris, November 7, 1936. The federations of veterans’ associations and of agricultural mutuals were not part of the CAEE in the end.

72. On the national federations of consumer and production cooperatives, see in particular Alain Chatriot’s summary essay, “Les coopérateurs,” in Jean-Jacques Becker and Gilles Candar (eds.), *Histoire des gauches en France*, vol. 2 (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), 91–97.

73. Jacques Girault, “Le communisme et les enseignants en France (années 1920–début des années 1960),” in id. (ed.) *Des communistes en France (années 1920–années 1960)* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2002) 207–218.

Aside from their political affinities, all these organizations had another point in common: they had until then mostly stayed away from the aid movement for Republican Spain.⁷⁴ None of them, apart from the LDH, had participated in pro-Republican meetings or in the Popular Front's Solidarity Commission. There were reasons for this reluctance to become involved in a movement that indissolubly mixed practical solidarity and the taking of political positions: These organizations' inability to overcome the divisions among their members regarding non-intervention (or even their taking a position in favor of it, as was the case of the leadership of the SNI and of the Federal Union of Veterans); the pre-eminence they gave to pacifism over anti-fascism; and, sometimes, reluctance regarding a Spanish Republican camp that was prey to ideological power struggles and within which Leftist movements also faced repression.⁷⁵ Victor Basch was clearly aware of this issue that ran throughout the French non-communist Left because, despite his personal involvement, he did not manage to get the Central Committee of the LDH to adopt a resolution against non-intervention. As for the secretary-general of the CGT, Léon Jouhaux, from September 1936 he was confronted with the public adoption of non-interventionist positions by senior trade union officials, such as the secretary-general of the SNI, André Delmas, who thereby openly opposed the official position of the CGT.⁷⁶ In a manner that was symptomatic of the personal opinions of the CAEE leaders, it was not André Delmas who was invited to the reception committee as the SNI representative, but the secretary-general of the General Federation of Teachers, Georges Lapierre, who was much closer to Léon Jouhaux and the CGT centrists on foreign policy.

It seems then that for this small group of men who were responsible for the creation of the CAEE, the cause of receiving Spanish children was perceived as being likely to create a rallying point for a certain section of the non-communist Left whose activism and symbolic resources had thus far been barely used within the movement of support for Republican Spain. The CAEE was thus meant to garner support from well beyond the activist base of the CGT and, in particular, persuade the middle classes and the moderate Left. This is what Félix Dupont explained to the departmental secretaries of the CGT in a circular of November 19, 1936 that declared the creation of the CAEE and called on them to "create similar sections of the Central Committee [the Paris-based CAEE] in each department,"⁷⁷ adding: "We must also be able to identify and use the generous interventions that may spring up from the milieus that are favorable to us." Undoubtedly, this enlarged mobilization appeared all the more desirable given that the formation of the International Brigades at the end of September 1936 created considerable momentum and further raised the profile of the involvement of the communist conglomerate in support of

74. This is also the case for the SNI, whose appeal for Republican Spain, which opened on October 10, 1936, was a failure. Jacques Girault, "Le syndicat national des instituteurs et les débuts de la guerre d'Espagne (1936–1937)," *Le Mouvement social* 103 (1978): 87–109.

75. This is particularly the case for the SNI: *ibid.* Echoes of the repression against the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification, the POUM, also appeared very early in the columns of *Syndicats*: George Dumoulin, "Les événements d'Espagne. Les conditions de notre solidarité," *Syndicats*, December 31, 1936, 1.

76. Poggioni, *La CGT du Front populaire à Vichy*, 162–163.

77. Félix Dupont, "Circulaire H. 69 aux UD. Faite à Paris le 19 novembre 1936," *La Voix du peuple*, November 1936, 709–710.

Republican Spain, tending to outshine all the other initiatives.⁷⁸ As for the cause of helping children, it could rally all those who were not in support of military assistance to the Republican camp.

This objective may explain the humanitarian, apolitical, and sentimental rhetoric deployed by the leaders of the CAEE. Indeed, these men, who did not hesitate to speak of anti-fascism and class solidarity when it came to taking a position on the Spanish Civil War or to organizing the provision of supplies to the Republican camp, framed the reception of children in a completely different way.⁷⁹ They presented it as a “humane act”⁸⁰ that would save suffering children whose lives were in danger. As for the cause of this suffering, it was the war, which was almost presented as a natural disaster (“a great drama,” “the great turmoil,”) whose violence was caused by weapons that no man appeared to wield (“the blind bomb,” “poison gas.”) The CAEE’s slogan reveals this stylistic sleight of hand: it was about receiving children “deprived of asylum or orphaned by the civil war”—not the coup d’état, the rebels, or fascism. By condemning the war, this discourse largely reflected typical pacifist rhetoric, which could strike a chord with a deeply pacifist French population. Even though the figure of the child victim could have allowed the centrists of the confederal leadership to condemn “the barbaric methods of the rebels,”⁸¹ who carried out “daily massacres of women and children,”⁸² the CAEE’s propaganda almost never referred to the Francoists. Similarly, the housing of children had nothing to do with any class solidarity or political motivation; volunteer families and donors, “decent people eager to do good,”⁸³ were simply driven by their “generosity”; the ability to be moved by and to “cherish” children was something shared by people from “very different social backgrounds: workers, artisans, civil servants, peasants, shopkeepers, small landowners.” Admittedly, this apolitical and humanitarian frame was not immediately consolidated. On December 14, *L’Œuvre* explained that the reception of Spanish children in France would make it possible to “reduce as much as possible the number of small victims of General Franco.”⁸⁴ In an opinion article in *Le Peuple* on January 15, 1937, Georges Buisson gave the CAEE as another example of “the fraternal aid that our comrades have enthusiastically

78. The period October–December 1936 was also the most intense phase of departures of volunteers to Spain as part of the International Brigades. The departures, which were not clandestine, were sometimes accompanied by ceremonies and processions. Rémi Skoutelsky, *L’espoir guidait leurs pas. Les volontaires français dans les Brigades internationales, 1936–1939* (Paris: Grasset, 1998), 120 and 333. On the feeling that communist involvement in the International Brigades made other aid initiatives invisible, in this case those from the socialist and trade union world, see Lépine, *Le socialisme international*, in particular page 231.

79. Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford. “Frame Alignment Processes.” “Framing” refers to the way in which actors diagnose the situation (“diagnostic framing”), propose a way to remedy it (“prognostic framing”), and identify reasons for action (“motivational framing”).

80. “La CGT à la radio. L’accueil aux enfants d’Espagne,” *Le Peuple*, December 23, 1936, 2.

81. “Les bombardements de Madrid,” *Le Peuple*, November 3, 1936, 3.

82. Quoted from the very resolution of the National Confederal Committee of December 7–8 1936. “La CGT précise sa position devant les événements d’Espagne,” *Le Peuple*, December 9, 1936, 1. The use of the figure of child victims of bombardment by Republican propaganda abroad has been analyzed by Robert A. Stradling, *Your Children Will Be Next: Bombing and Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008).

83. “La CGT à la radio. L’accueil aux enfants d’Espagne,” *Le Peuple*, December 23, 1936, 2.

84. “Échappés du massacre... Comment va être organisé en France et à l’étranger l’hébergement des petits réfugiés espagnols,” *L’Œuvre*, December 14, 1936, 2.

given to their brothers in Spain, defenders of civilization against Franco's thugs."⁸⁵ After this date, however, such political considerations, which were limited from the outset, disappeared entirely, replaced by the idea that the CAEE could bring together all sensibilities. In his radio speech of March 2, 1937, Georges Buisson exclaimed: "Catholics, free thinkers, communists, socialists, or Republicans: men of heart, whoever you are, let us unite to save these children!"⁸⁶

There may be a final reason why Léon Jouhaux, Georges Buisson, and Félix Dupont decided to involve the confederation in the reception of Spanish children: its propaganda potential. Until then, the CGT's actions in favor of Republican Spain, despite their high volume (on November 1, 1936, more than 4 million francs had been raised for Republican Spain), had not been widely publicized. The confederation, for example, only made its shipments of pharmaceutical supplies and food supplies public after the fact, and often rather briefly.⁸⁷ It is possible that part of this discretion was due to the fact that these deliveries may have included military material whose transportation to Spain would have contravened the non-intervention pact.⁸⁸ It also appears that the writers of *Le Peuple* had some difficulty telling captivating stories around shipments of anti-gangrene serum or crates of sugar. Only one attempt was made to this end: on August 12, 1936, as part of a long reportage entitled "Tempête sur l'Espagne," ("Storm over Spain") serialized in *Le Peuple*, the journalist Pierre Robert wrote of the arrival in Catalonia of an ambulance containing "anti-gangrene and anti-tetanus serums and bandaging material,"⁸⁹ trying as best as he could to turn it into the story of "an eventful journey." After that date, *Le Peuple* only mentioned these shipments in brief and very factual paragraphs. On the other hand, the evacuation of groups of hundreds of children, their journey across the border, their reception in French volunteer families, their state of health, their joys and sorrows, gave substance to many articles and reports, not only in the trade union press, but also in that of the partner organizations or those who were sympathetic to the cause. The reception of children not only made it possible to rally a large sector of the French Left, hitherto little mobilized in regard to the Spanish Civil War, but also to give it an evocative cause that was likely to capture imaginations.

Using trade union resources for the reception of Spanish children

From January 1937, the arrival of the first groups of Spanish children to France marked the beginning of the realization on the ground of the CAEE's "humane act." However, the CAEE was not a specialist humanitarian organization, regardless of how carefully its framing and organizational chart had been devised. For it to

85. Georges Buisson, "Pour sauver les enfants d'Espagne," *Le Peuple*, January 15, 1937, 1–2.

86. "La CGT à la radio. L'accueil aux enfants d'Espagne. Causerie faite par Georges Buisson au poste de la Tour Eiffel," *Le Peuple*, March 3, 1937, 2.

87. For example, "The CGT has sent another large quantity of serums to Barcelona for the Aragon front. The Barcelona health center has just sent the following telegram to the CGT: 'On behalf of the Catalan people, the Barcelona health center says thank you for the consignment of serum,'" "Solidarité avec les camarades espagnols. Un nouvel envoi de sérum à Barcelone," *Le Peuple*, August 28, 1936, 1.

88. This is one of the reasons proposed by Nicolas Lépine in the case of the International Federation of Trade Unions. "Le socialisme international," 227.

89. "Solidarité internationale. Le convoi de la CGT est arrivé à Barcelone. Un voyage mouvementé dans les montagnes catalanes," *Le Peuple*, August 12, 1936, 1.

achieve its objectives, it needed to mobilize significant financial, human, logistical, and organizational resources adapted to its mission.⁹⁰ On this point, the source material is quite rich. It shows that, to a large extent, the CAEE built its reception system by converting the resources and the forms of action and organization of the labor movement. In so doing, its trade union origins and the activist identity of its leaders made their mark on how the children were received, with consequences that were perhaps unexpected or that at least partially contradicted the initial intentions of the founders.

The first challenge was to find host families. The CAEE had ambitious objectives; in December 1936, it planned to receive 25,000 children.⁹¹ In the first articles on the CAEE and in the CGT's instructions to its UD's, the need to collect offers from people who wished to host a Spanish child was always mentioned. It seems that the vast majority of these offers were from trade union members and, more generally, from the working class, as is suggested by a list from summer 1937 with the addresses of 283 Spanish children living in Isère.⁹² It demonstrates how the geographical distribution of reception corresponded perfectly to that of urbanization and industrialization in the region of Dauphiné. The placement of children in families was concentrated around the large conurbations—Grenoble and Vienne—but especially in small, almost exclusively working-class communes with a few hundred or a few thousand inhabitants. While some were placed in towns of old industry, such as Alleverd-les-Bains, whose steelworks dated back to the Middle Ages, half of the Spanish children were housed in fifteen “new towns”⁹³ characterized by “the hegemony of industry” and “the homogeneity of the working population.” Nationally, just as in Isère, the vast pool of trade union members was more than enough to meet the needs of the CAEE; in just over a year, the CGT had grown from 785,000 members (in 1935) to almost 4 million (at the beginning of 1937). In the first months of 1937, Georges Buisson in Paris and Joseph Berta in Perpignan had more often to call for patience among the first volunteers who were eager to receive the child they had asked for, than to call for the recruitment of new host families.⁹⁴

Because departmental and local CAEEs relied on the trade union networks, long-standing mutual knowledge made it easy to monitor the families, whether in advance, in order to “seriously verify the material, sanitary, and moral conditions in which the children who will have to be received may find themselves,”⁹⁵ as Georges Buisson urged, or afterwards, once the children had been placed. In Aude, the head of the committee and secretary-general of the UD, Élie Sermet, personally knew some of the guardians of the Spanish children that he himself had placed. For

90. Emmanuel Pierru, “Organisations et ressources,” in Olivier Fillieule, Lilian Mathieu, and Cécile Péchu (eds.), *Dictionnaire des mouvements sociaux* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2009), 394–402.

91. “Échappés du massacre... Comment va être organisé en France et à l'étranger l'hébergement des petits réfugiés espagnols,” *L'Œuvre*, December 14, 1936, 2.

92. AGA (9) 17.12 51/21124, “Relación de niños españoles con indicación del Departamento en que fueron alojados en Francia,” n.d.

93. Pierre Barral, *Le département de l'Isère sous la Troisième République. 1870-1940* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1962), 51 sq.

94. These calls for patience can be found as early as “Circulaire H. 76 de Georges Buisson destinée aux Fédérations nationales et aux Unions départementales: ‘Pour Aider l'Espagne!’, Paris, December 29, 1936,” *La Voix du Peuple*, December 1936, 793. Numerous others followed in *Le Peuple*.

95. Ibid.

example, he knew “comrade Joulia,” who bought socks for the boy he was hosting but forgot to bring the receipts to the UD to obtain financial assistance.⁹⁶ Élie Sermet also knew the “Féneca woman” who stole the money that was supposed to be used to buy shoes for an eight-year-old girl from Madrid, but from whom he would not claim the money back because “that would have caused discord in the family and we preferred to lose this sum rather than let that happen.”⁹⁷ In Isère, Antonin Albert, head of the departmental reception committee and member of the departmental bureau of the SNI, sent circulars to his fellow teachers asking them to investigate families in a “discreet but very serious [way] to find out if difficulties, material or otherwise, have arisen.”⁹⁸ While some departmental officials reported information to the Parisian CAEE, it does not seem that Georges Buisson intervened in their affairs: like the CGT, the CAEE was a decentralized organization, which relied on the competence and autonomy of its activists.

The horizontal relationships between trade union officials who knew one another contributed to the successful functioning of the committee. The distribution of the 3,000 Basque children who arrived on the Habana ship on June 13, 1937 is a striking example. When they arrived, the children were sent by the French authorities to various prefectural hosting centers where they were mixed in with all of the Spanish refugees from the Basque coast. But on June 17, 1937 Georges Buisson sent a circular letter to the departmental reception committees to call on them to collect the children. They had to bring them to the new CAEE transit center located in the old Val d’Or factory in Saint-Cloud, in the Paris region (the Pyrénées-Orientales transit camps had just closed). From there, it was planned to distribute the children based on the places found for them either in other host countries, such as Belgium or Denmark, or in France thanks to the departmental committees and the partner organizations of the CAEE. However, in many departments, the demand for children was so great that their stay in the Val d’Or transit center was unnecessary. As the head of the Drôme-Ardèche committee, Gaston Vala, explained to Georges Buisson, the placement could be managed locally:

It would be ridiculous [. . .] to send these children to the Paris region just to make them come back to our region later. You know we have guaranteed places for more than one hundred children and this number is going to grow.⁹⁹

Finally, the distribution to families of all the children housed in the region’s prefectural centers was managed autonomously by the Drôme-Ardèche committee and its counterparts in Isère, Loire, Haute-Savoie, Hautes-Alpes, and Rhône. A long letter from Antonin Albert, from the Isère committee, reported on this:

I saw Vala who had just returned from visiting the 450 children in Ardèche, in Chomérac, in an abandoned factory—a precarious temporary situation. I telephoned the prefect of Ardèche to let him know that St-Étienne is requesting 150

96. IHS-CGT, 97 CFD 45/5, f. 192, handwritten note by Élie Sermet to the treasury of the Aude CAEE, n.d.

97. Ibid., f. 91, letter from Élie Sermet to Félix Dupont, Narbonne, April 1, 1939.

98. Underlined in the text. IHS-CGT, 97 CFD 45/6, f. 13, “Circulaire adressée à mes collègues instituteurs syndiqués pour des enquêtes indépendantes des familles,” sent by Antonin Albert to Georges Buisson, Grenoble, October 6, 1937.

99. AN, 20010221/9, inventory 2, folder 3, f. 165, letter from Gaston Vala to Georges Buisson, Valence, June 18, 1937.

for immediate family placement (Buard had indeed written to me immediately upon receipt of your letter) [. . .] I decided with Vala from Valence that as soon as I returned I would list all of my confirmed requests from recent days in Isère. [. . .] I also wrote to the Hautes-Alpes reception committee in Gap, who are in contact with Vala in Valence, to urge them to organize one or two emergency buses [. . .] I also wrote to our comrade, Pierre Raymond, secretary of the Popular Front and the Human Rights League (for Haute-Savoie) [. . .] I also wrote to Vivier-Merle in Lyon.¹⁰⁰

This letter is dated June 21, 1937: a week after the arrival of the Habana in the harbor of Pauillac. It demonstrates the responsiveness and effectiveness of these trade unionists who were used to managing their UD or their section. The decisions taken by Gaston Vala, Antonin Albert, Marius Vivier-Merle, and Claudius Buard (all important trade union leaders) did not go through Paris—the letter from the Isère official is a “report”¹⁰¹ of what had been done thus far by a few men who had organized matters among themselves.

The decentralized nature of the national trade union center had still other effects. Because some CGT local and departmental unions had been run by *ex-unitaires* since the trade union reunification, there was no longer a separation between the CAEE and the communist conglomerate at the implementation level. This was the case in Rouen for example, where the secretary-general of the local union, the communist Jean Creignou, was also president of the Rouen reception committee for Spanish children and as such managed the placement of the twenty-five Spanish children received in the city.¹⁰² But the local and departmental committees were treated differently by the Parisian management of the CAEE depending on whether they were managed by *ex-confédérés* or *ex-unitaires*, as the example of Lot-et-Garonne shows. Two committees coexisted there: one headed by the secretary-general of the UD, Louis Aurin, a communist official, and the other by the SNI activist, Émile Baynac, who was strongly anti-communist. While the Agen children’s colony founded by Louis Aurin was funded entirely by the UD, the château de Lamothe colony was denied any local resources by the UD and was therefore almost entirely dependent on the Parisian committee. It even took up a third of the expenditure of the national CAEE in the second half of 1937, going up to almost half (46 percent) in the following six-month period, then falling slightly to 40 percent in the second half of 1938; all in all, this colony alone cost the central treasury of the committee 640,000 francs. This case, which is certainly extreme, reveals a fundamental trend: departmental and local committees headed by *ex-unitaires* received one hundred times less in subsidies from Paris than those headed by *ex-confédérés*, despite the fact that there were only twice as many of the latter.¹⁰³

100. Ibid., f. 162, letter from Antonin Albert to Georges Buisson, Grenoble, June 21, 1937.

101. Ibid.

102. Jean Creignou bears the title of President of the Rouen reception committee for Spanish children in his letter to the CAEE, Rouen, October 5, 1938. AN, 20010221/9, inventory 2, folder 2, f. 41. We know that the local Rouen union placed twenty-five Spanish children according to “Relación de la situación de los niños españoles con fecha 12 de Junio de 1937 y controlados por la OCEAR,” June 12, 1937 (Fundación Pablo Iglesias (FPI), AH-81-9, f. 3-9). On Jean Creignou, see Jean Maitron and Gilles Pichavant, “Creignou Jean, François, Henri,” in Jean Maitron and Claude Penneret (eds.), *Maitron en ligne. Dictionnaire biographique, mouvement ouvrier, mouvement social*, 2008.

103. These calculations were made on the basis of the CAEE’s expenditure statements: IHS-CGT, 97 CFD 46/1, f. 104–121.

In fact, the most important resource, and that which the CAEE's leaders were most concerned about, was money. Félix Dupont and Georges Buisson recalled this constantly and forcefully: "stressing the words, Félix Dupont insists:—Make it clear that a major financial effort is required to ensure the continuity of the scheme!"; "The action we have undertaken requires considerable sums of money"; "We need money, a lot of money, for these thousands of poor little ones."¹⁰⁴ By launching a subscription whose results were published in *Le Peuple*, and by calling on the UD secretaries-general to circulate appeal lists in the trade unions, the CAEE leaders were once again relying on the practices of financial solidarity long established in trade union culture.¹⁰⁵ They were also counting on the impressive increase in their number of members, and therefore in membership fees. At the time, the CGT could mobilize significant economic resources; when the subscription for the Spanish children was launched in December 1936, and in addition to that "in aid of the Spanish people" that opened in July 1936, *Le Peuple* publicized a third one for the victims of the explosion that occurred on November 16, 1936 at the Saint-Chamas gunpowder factory in Bouches-du-Rhône,¹⁰⁶ and a fourth for the striking steelworkers of Nord.¹⁰⁷ But the solidarity of trade union members was not the only solidarity expected; as we have seen, the leaders of the CAEE counted on broad support from the French Left and the middle classes. The CAEE's first subscription list clearly indicates its ambiguous nature; while it was similar to a typical trade union subscription in that many of its subscribers were trade union sections (such as the PTT [postal and telecommunications services] of Caudry, the SNI of Vendée, or the railway workers of the Orléans network), it also included many individual donations, which represented more than half of the contributions.¹⁰⁸

Initially, the funds raised by the CAEE were primarily meant to cover the children's stay in what the CGT called "transit camps," before their placement in a family. The camps were very expensive; at the end of March 1937, the installation and running costs of La Mauresque and Prats-de-Mollo in the Pyrénées-Orientales, and of the Maison heureuse on the island of Oléron, swallowed up three quarters of the 650,000 francs spent for the approximately 1,200 Spanish children who had arrived in France up to that date.¹⁰⁹ The remaining quarter was taken up by various

104. Interview with Félix Dupont: "Plus de six millions de francs ont été recueillis en quelques mois par la CGT. C'est ce qui a permis de parer au plus pressé, mais l'effort le plus considérable reste encore à réaliser," *Le Peuple*, February 27, 1937, 4; interview with Georges Buisson: "L'effort de solidarité doit continuer pour les petits orphelins espagnols. Sous l'égide de la CGT le Comité d'Accueil adresse à tous un pressant appel," *ibid.*; Georges Buisson, "D'urgence au secours des enfants d'Espagne," *Le Peuple*, February 10, 1937, 1.

105. Nicolas Delalande, *La lutte et l'entraide: l'âge des solidarités ouvrières* (Paris: Seuil, 2019), chapter 2.

106. After one month, 109,276.05 francs were paid to the Fédération des travailleurs de l'État (Federation of State Workers): "Pour les victimes de la catastrophe de Saint-Chamas," *Le Peuple*, December 15, 1936, 1.

107. This donation drive was opened on December 15, 1936. The confederation itself contributed 50,000 francs; no further information was found. "Un appel de la CGT pour les métallurgistes du Nord," *Le Peuple*, January 6, 1937, 1.

108. "Souscription du Comité d'accueil aux enfants d'Espagne. Première liste," *Le Peuple*, February 9, 1937, 5.

109. IHS-CGT, 97 CFD 46/1, f. 104-121, CAEE expenditure statement. On the number of children received by the CAEE, see the copy of the letter from Facundo Roca, Spanish delegate to the CAEE, to Federica Montseny, Spanish Minister of Health and Social Assistance, Paris, April 8, 1937 (FPI, AH-81-4, f. 24-25).

“children’s supplies,”¹¹⁰ such as blankets, sheets, socks, boxer shorts, underwear, sandals, gloves, etc. Although the CAEE leaders seem to have been aware of the financial risk of their undertaking, their initial model was relatively secure against the possibility of a decrease or drying up of cash inflow, since, once placed in families, the Spanish children barely represented any cost to the committee.

However, the planned expenditure increased unexpectedly when, in mid-March 1937, the Spanish government decided to discontinue family placement in favor of placing children in collective colonies, as they wanted them to receive a Spanish education given by Spanish teachers.¹¹¹ Georges Buisson warned of the risks that this decision could entail for the entire project. The CAEE did not have such collective colonies and the transit camps hosted French children on vacation during the summer and therefore could not be occupied permanently. Fitting out empty premises would be costly and difficult. Finally, and more generally, “the placement of children in collective colonies requires considerably higher expenses than family placement.”¹¹² Despite this reluctance and the financial risks involved in a project that could only be maintained with significant and continuous expenditure, the CAEE got to work. The departmental and local CAEEs went in search of available buildings to be refurbished, often with financial assistance from the Parisian CAEE, as was the case of the château de Lamothe in Lot-et-Garonne, which received 100 children from April 22, 1937.¹¹³

In order to develop its network of children’s colonies, the CAEE relied mainly on the infrastructure that had been developed by the CGT since the early 1930s as part of the “service unionism.”¹¹⁴ This infrastructure had significantly expanded since the beginning of 1936, thanks to the boom in trade union membership and the resulting increase in membership fees. The trade union movement then opened clinics, nursing homes, orphanages, and summer camps. Several of these structures were used by the CAEE: the Vouzeron steelworkers’ colony in Cher; the Baillet colony in the former department of Seine-et-Oise; the orphanage of the railway workers’ union in Avernès, also in Seine-et-Oise; the orphanage of the tobaccoists in Charny in Seine-et-Marne; and the nursing home of Petite-Synthe in Nord. All of these sites received several hundred Spanish children between 1936 and 1939. The conversion of service unionism resources in order to receive Spanish children between 1936 and 1939 could also work in the opposite direction. Thus, when in November 1938 the director of the children’s colony at château de Lamothe tried to justify to Georges Buisson the local committee’s acquisition of a new property in the neighboring commune of Laparade for 15,000 francs, he wrote to him:

I can almost see you shaking your head, stroking your goatee and grumbling: “What on earth are we going to do with that thing once the kids have left?” Well, here you go! It will be a CGT vacation camp.¹¹⁵

110. I have used here the nomenclature from the CAEE’s statement of expenditure for 1937.

111. FPI, AH-81-4, f. 17, telegram from Federica Montseny to Amós Sabrás, March 19, 1937.

112. AN, 20010221/9, inventory 2, folder 3, f. 181–186, copy of Georges Buisson’s letter to the Spanish Ministry of Health and Social Assistance, n.d. [Paris, March 31, 1937].

113. “La Bourse du Travail de Toulouse accueille les petits réfugiés espagnols,” *Le Peuple*, April 27, 1937, 2.

114. Poggioli, *La CGT du Front populaire à Vichy*.

115. AN, 20010221/9, inventory 2, folder 2, f. 18–20, letter from Émile Baynac to Georges Buisson, Villeneuve-sur-Lot, November 18, 1938.

In addition to trade union resources, the network of partners called upon when the CAEE was founded was also useful when it came to creating the children's colonies. The cooperative movement was that which contributed most to the CAEE. The cooperative activists in Limousin made their vacation camp in Mas Éloi available to the departmental committee,¹¹⁶ and the Enfance cooperative (Children's Cooperative) created two colonies in the Paris region: in Bièvres on May 3, 1937, then in Chantilly on July 21, 1937.¹¹⁷ But again, the funds came mainly from the working class, whose members sponsored the hosted children. For example, the CGT Federation of Metalworkers sponsored a little girl residing at the Chantilly colony and then, after her return to Spain in January 1939, they sponsored a little boy until June 1939.¹¹⁸ To do this, they had to pay a monthly board of 350 francs, with an additional 20 or 30 francs often added for the purchase of new clothes. Apparently, this amount was not insignificant, as the federation was regularly late with its payments.

As this last example shows, in practice, a significant part of the CAEE's network of children's colonies, like its family placement system, was based on the resources of the communist conglomerate. In addition to the federation's sponsorship of the Enfance Coopérative colony, the Parisian metalworkers' union, which was dominated by *ex-unitaires*, hosted, as has been mentioned, some 100 Spanish children in its summer camps from early summer 1937. The image of these children, dancing and singing in the park of the château de Vouzeron, remained immortalized in the film *Les Métallus* produced by the trade union in 1937.¹¹⁹ The union also entrusted several children to the "steelworker comrades"¹²⁰ of Paris and its suburbs. In June 1937, twenty-five children from Madrid and Malaga were received in Ivry-sur-Seine.¹²¹ Hosted at the expense of the communist city hall, they became emblems of the PCF's solidarity in the city where the party's secretary-general, Maurice Thorez, had been the deputy since 1932. When necessary, the help of the organizations of the conglomerate was not rejected; in Lens in September 1938, the secretary of the SPF came to the aid of the CAEE inspector, who had come to deal with the case of two brothers who, "being utterly intolerable, could not stay with the people who housed them."¹²² After a few inquiries, the secretary of the SPF managed to place them with "mineworker comrades in the region." The image of the CAEE that emerges from the observation of its actual practices therefore differs greatly from the image of a humanitarian organization, apolitical and relieved of its founders'

116. "300 enfants basques évacués de Bilbao sont arrivés à Paris," *Le Peuple*, April 23, 1937, 1.

117. AN, 20010221/9, inventory 2, folder 2, f. 48-71, report by the Spanish Delegation for Evacuated Children at the conference organized by the International Committee of Coordination and Information for Aid to Republican Spain (CICIAER), Paris, 20–21 November 1937.

118. IHS-CGT, Archives of the Fédération des métaux et similaires (Federation of Metalworkers), 73.1.592, f. 272, letter from Ms. Germaine Ménard to Jean Cattaneo [treasurer of the Federation of Metalworkers], Chantilly, January 21, 1939.

119. Jacques Lemare, *Les Métallus*, produced by the Syndicat des ouvriers de la métallurgie (CGT) de la région parisienne, 1937, available at: <https://www.cinearchives.org/Films-447-54-0-0.html>.

120. IHS-CGT, 97 CFD 45/6, f. 24, letter from the manager of the château de Baillet, Henri Gautier, to Georges Buisson, Paris, September 7, 1939.

121. Municipal archives of Ivry-sur-Seine, Ricardo Torrijos, "Vivencias de un 'Niño de Francia,'" unpublished typescript, 2005, 33.

122. AN, 20010221, inventory 2, folder 3, f. 87–88, copy of the report by the CAEE inspector, Émile Dantard, on his trip to Lens, September 8, 1938.

activist identities, which the latter had sought to build. In the field, the committee was linked to the trade union activities of the men who managed it, and relied on the resources at their disposal. One of the perhaps unexpected consequences of this state of affairs was the porosity of the border that its founders wanted to draw between the CAEE and the communist conglomerate.

The fragility of humanitarian work when subject to political and trade union uncertainties

After a year of intense involvement from the fall of 1936 to the fall of 1937, the CGT gradually withdrew from the cause of the Spanish children in France. This withdrawal occurred in two distinct phases with different causes and different consequences. Nevertheless, the fact that the CAEE depended in practice on the trade union movement played a role in each stage of this collapse: On the one hand, because the reception of the Spanish children remained on the whole a secondary cause for the CGT, including for Félix Dupont and Georges Buisson, who were members of the confederal bureau first and directors of the CAEE second; and, on the other hand, because the reliance on the resources of the working class, subject to economic and political uncertainties, meant that it could be impacted by any economic downturn or political change.

The first crisis faced by the CAEE occurred in the fall of 1937. It was caused by growing dissension with the government of the Spanish Republic.¹²³ Indeed, from the summer of 1937, the Spanish Ministry of Public Instruction challenged the CGT's autonomy of action and wanted to organize the placement of children in France itself via a delegate based in Paris. The conflict quickly turned sour. While a *modus vivendi* was finally found, the reception of children did not emerge unscathed. The CGT secured the continuation of care of those it had already placed, but refused to receive new ones. Evacuations of children to France were interrupted for nine months, while in Republican Spain the demand from families to send children abroad had never been so strong. But the CGT was not an organization focused on humanitarian aid. It could interrupt its relief work without losing its *raison d'être*.

From that point onwards, the CAEE's mobilization effort diminished. Its secretary-general, Georges Buisson, stopped making speeches on the radio and calling for donations. Articles in the CGT's daily newspaper became less frequent: between October 1937 and May 1938, Georges Buisson did not publish a single article on the CAEE, whereas until then he had been publishing several a month. In the departments, the UD's no longer organized propaganda and donation drives for Spanish children in France. On October 28, Élie Sermet from the Aude UD asked Félix Dupont for 1,500 or 2,000 francs in financial support. Commenting on the "budgetary situation" of the departmental committee, he explained: "we are not doing so well, it is true that we have not been holding meetings for some time now, and so no collections."¹²⁴ The proceeds of the national subscription were decreasing

123. On this point, see Célia Keren, "Négocier l'aide humanitaire: les évacuations d'enfants espagnols vers la France pendant la guerre civile (1936–1939)," *Revue d'histoire de l'enfance "irrégulière"* 15 (2013): 167–183.

124. AN, 20010221/9, inventory 2, folder 3, f. 105, copy of the letter from Élie Sermet, head of the Aude CAEE, to Félix Dupont, Narbonne, October 28, 1938.

inexorably. Finally, following a cabinet reshuffle in Spain in April 1938, the CGT reached an agreement with the new Minister of Public Instruction, Segundo Blanco. It then sought to once again receive groups of Spanish children in France,¹²⁵ but failed to get the mobilizing machine going again. Although some groups of children were taken to France between June 1938 and January 1939, those transports were either entirely taken care of by foreign committees (such as the Swiss Socialist Women's Committee, which financed two convoys to Sète and to Gréoux-les-Bains in June and September 1938¹²⁶), or by activist circles whose involvement in the scheme had been limited until then (such as in Oran and Casablanca, where CAEE departmental reception committees were only then set up). In Paris, the CAEE itself did not have the necessary funds to create new reception centers. As Georges Buisson explained as early as June 1938: "Our resources allow us just enough to ensure the existence of the colonies we have set up."¹²⁷

It was at this point that the second major crisis of the CAEE occurred, directly connected to the French trade union situation in late 1938. On November 30, the CGT called for a general strike against the Reynaud decree laws, which threatened the achievements of the Popular Front. The failure of this strike was catastrophic for the CGT and the working classes, who were faced with employers and a government eager to put an end to the social movement for good. Almost 10 percent of workers were temporarily or permanently laid off. Black lists circulated among employers to prevent the re-employment of union activists.¹²⁸ This terrible crisis had an immediate impact on the CAEE. Dismissals affected donors, sponsors, and host families. As early as December 10, 1938, the head of the Loire committee reported that

many sponsors left our organization as a result of sanctions or dismissals [. . .] If we fail to remind comrades of their duty to refugee children in our region, we will only be able to keep a part of our group of eighty-eight children.¹²⁹

In Alfortville, in the Parisian suburbs, M. Ibañez had to bid farewell to young Angel "because he had lost his job."¹³⁰ Comrade A. Benoist, living in Arcueil in the former department of Seine, had to stop providing for the child he was sponsoring, Modesto Fuentes, "following the strike last November 30 after I was dismissed from the workshop where I worked and where I had, along with other comrades (including Renaud from the typographers' union), managed to provide his board."¹³¹ The child "still has toys in the house that he had left after the September vacation," and Benoist asked the treasurer of the Federation of Metalworkers that was now

125. Georges Buisson, "Encore des enfants à sauver," *Le Peuple*, April 7, 1938, 1; "Solidarité pour les enfants d'Espagne," *Le Peuple*, June 4, 1938, 1–3.

126. AGA (9) 17.12 51/21124, "Relación de niños que partieron el día 25 de junio de 1938, para la Colonia colectiva de Sète (Francia)" and "Relación de los niños que forman la expedición escolar a Greux-les-Bains [Gréoux-les-Bains] (Hérault) Francia."

127. AN, 20010221/9, inventory 2, folder 3, f. 107, copy of a letter from Georges Buisson to Élie Sermet, Paris, June 7, 1938.

128. Poggioli, *La CGT du Front populaire à Vichy*, 206.

129. IHS-CGT, 97 CFD 46/1, letter from René Bardenet to Georges Buisson, Montbéliard, December 10, 1938.

130. AN, 20010221/9, inventory 2, folder 3, f. 93–96, copy of Émile Dantard's report: "Alfortville," written in Paris, December 28, 1938.

131. IHS-CGT, Archives of the Federation of Metalworkers, 73.1.592, f. 266, letter from A. Benoist, 41 rue de la Vallée in Arcueil, Seine, to the Federation of Metalworkers, March 8, 1939.

sponsoring him “if he could have the child stay with him and his family for the Easter holidays like last year.” Just like him, many workers simply could no longer provide for the needs of the child whose stay in the colony they had subsidized or who they had hosted at home.

On top of this, trade union generosity was now directed towards the dismissed workers: more than 360,000 unemployed people received financial aid from the CGT by the end of 1938. On January 13, 1939, the first “subscription [list] for the victims of employer repression”¹³² showed that half a million francs had been raised. Meanwhile, between November 25 and January 5, 1939, the CAEE collected 23,000 francs.¹³³ Soon, in Paris, there was no more money left at all. As the exodus of half a million Spaniards to the Pyrenees border began, the CAEE started to close some of its colonies and distribute the children who lived there to volunteer families. It was at the beginning of March 1939 that repatriation was explicitly mentioned in Georges Buisson’s correspondence as a possible solution to the problems of the CAEE. This was indeed the decision that most local officials opted for during the weeks that saw the final defeat of the Republican Army. Two weeks after the Francoist troops entered Madrid, the head of the Drôme-Ardèche committee, Rémy Duclaut, explained:

We are currently taking every opportunity to send them back to Spain, but we can only do so when we know that their parents are able to receive them.

On a human level, it is not possible for us to send children that we have kept under our protection for two years off into the unknown.

I am therefore asking you to make an effort by sending me the sum of four thousand francs [. . .] pending a solution that will release us from all these duties.¹³⁴

With a knife to their throat, local committees everywhere were wrapping up their work. In some places, they managed to transfer the children in their charge to British and US humanitarian organizations that had funds and that arrived in large numbers to France after the exodus of January 1939, such as the Foster Parents’ Committee for Spanish Children, which took forty-five children from the Centro español de Perpignan to its new colony, “Les Charmilles,” in Sables, in Basses-Pyrénées.¹³⁵ But this case was an exception. Most children under the guardianship of the CAEE were either repatriated to Spain or sent to their families, now refugees in France, once they were located. By the end of 1939, the CAEE system was completely dismantled and the organization itself had almost disappeared.

From the starting point of an investigation centered on the CGT and the resources and motivations behind its involvement in the housing of Spanish children, it became necessary to broaden the focus and to discard the monographic approach. In this article, the CGT has been considered partly indirectly, based on sources from, and the perspectives of, the actors that interacted with it: primarily

132. “Souscription pour les victimes de la répression patronale. Première liste. Bureau confédéral CGT,” *Le Peuple*, January 11, 1939, 5.

133. “Souscription du CAEE. 43^e liste,” *Le Peuple*, January 5, 1939, 5.

134. IHS-CGT, 97 CFD 45/6, f. 40, letter from Rémy Duclaut to Félix Dupont, Valence, April 18, 1938 [1939].

135. See the two lists in AGA (9) 17. 12 51/21124. The Basses-Pyrénées department is now called “Pyrénées-Atlantiques”.

the LDH, the SRF and the PCF, as well as some of its members organizations, such as the SNI. This approach, caused by archival constraints, also has a heuristic value. Indeed, the CGT is not an isolated actor and its commitment to the cause of the Spanish children, as in any other case, cannot be understood solely by considering the opinions, values, or tendencies of its leaders or its base. As I have tried to demonstrate, the “reasons for involvement” in the CAEE “are not necessarily linked to its purpose”¹³⁶; CGT officials certainly wanted to help the Spanish children, but they also wanted to (re)position the CGT in a complex and constantly evolving organizational space. The approach adopted here has therefore not consisted of classifying the various organizations of the French Left and of the Aid Spain movement, for example on a scale ranging from the most pacifist groups to those most involved in the fight against non-intervention, but rather of studying a relational space, considering the way in which these different actors positioned themselves and defined themselves in relation to one another.¹³⁷ In this regard, the CAEE responded first of all to a desire shared by the president of the LDH, Victor Basch, and the centrists of the confederation, to which he was close: that of resisting the growing communist hold on the aid movement for Republican Spain. Thus, while there already existed a committee for the accommodation of Spanish children in France, which was closely dependent on the PCF, Victor Basch and Léon Jouhaux decided to create a new committee from scratch and to set it up separately from the conglomerate, inviting only non-partisan organizations associated either with a more moderate Left or with circles whose pacifism made collaboration with the communists in the context of aid to Spain difficult. Therein lies a second reason for involvement in the CAEE: for both the LDH and the CGT, the CAEE would be likely to mobilize hitherto relatively uncommitted forces of the non-communist Left and, more broadly, of all the organizations whose divisions regarding non-intervention, or even support for non-intervention, made it very difficult to be invested in an aid movement for Spain that had adopted the slogan “guns and planes for Spain.” The CAEE was thus meant to both increase the solidarity of French society with Spain and to strengthen the CGT’s position. This is all the more true since the fate of these children, evacuated from Spain to be received by French families in order to be protected from the dangers of war, was likely to move people, to capture imaginations, and to turn into a mass relief effort commensurable with, if not equivalent to, that of the newly created International Brigades. On the ground, things were different. Separation between the CAEE and the conglomerate on an institutional level was impossible to maintain: not only did the *ex-unitaires* participate in the CAEE’s effort (although they did not lead it), but collaborations with the PCF and its satellites often proved fruitful, if not essential.

At a time when the major British and American humanitarian organizations were highlighting their own expertise, often inherited from the social work that had become more professionalized since the end of the nineteenth century,¹³⁸ the

136. Christophe Capuano and Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel, “Qu’est-ce qu’une association catholique ‘efficace’? Consommation et famille en France (1900–1947),” *Entreprises et histoire* 56, no. 3 (2009): 30–48.

137. Michel Dobry, “La thèse immunitaire face aux fascismes. Pour une critique de la logique classificatoire,” in id. (ed.), *Le mythe de l’allergie française au fascisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003), 17–67.

138. Rebecca Gill, *Calculating Compassion: Humanity and Relief in War, Britain 1870–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Baughan, “*Saving the Children*.”

CGT was quite successful in making do with its own resources and those of its partners, and in putting them to use in order to fulfil its “humane act.” At first, the fact that the reception of Spanish children in France was carried out by the largest mass organization of the French Left was far from a handicap. The CGT was deeply rooted in the social fabric. It could quickly and easily mobilize a large part of the population by drawing on the pool of trade union members and sympathizers to find donors, host families, and a wide range of professionals, from hairdressers to teachers. Its decentralized organization, supported by seasoned activists who were trusted by Paris and who worked well together, allowed it to be reactive in a critical situation, as was the case with the sudden arrival of thousands of Basque children in June 1937. In this sense, the mobilization for the children of Spain initially benefited from not being led by specialized humanitarian organizations (with a limited social base, especially in France), but by trade union organizations that structured and guided the ordinary and everyday social interactions and activism of millions of French men and women.

On the other hand, the history of the CAEE illustrates the difficulty, and probably the limitations, of humanitarian action when it is carried out by a non-humanitarian organization. Because it drew its resources from the CGT, the CAEE and the scope of its action depended less on the evolution of the Spanish Civil War than on the ups and downs of the French trade union and political situation—in particular, the end of the Popular Front and the trade union decline at the end of 1938. The CAEE did not break up because of Franco’s victory or the outbreak of the Second World War. The fatal blow was the exhaustion of the mobilizing capacities of the CGT and its allies, after the employer and political repression that hit the working class. The end of this story was all the more painful for many families and leaders on the ground because, although the cause of the Spanish children no longer mobilized people, the Spanish children were still there. And it was the same CGT activists who organized their reception who then had to take it upon themselves to send them back to Francoist Spain. This inglorious end no doubt partly explains the confederal leadership’s inability to create a mobilization for the “Retirada” refugees comparable to that which it had been able to trigger in 1936 and maintain in 1937 for the Spanish children evacuated to France.¹³⁹

139. Célia Keren, “Les enfants espagnols réfugiés en France: 1939 ou la crise de la solidarité ouvrière,” *Cahiers du Centre de recherches historiques* 44 (2009): 75–89.