

North American ANARCHIST

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CNT debates future

by: Brian Amesly

On December 8 one of the most significant events in the history of the international Anarchist movement was held in Madrid, Spain, the opening of the Fifth Congress of the Spanish Confederation of National Labour (CNT). The congress was the first one in forty-three years for the mass anarcho-sindicalist labour union which is the largest anarchist organization in the world.

In view of this, it was natural that the convening of the congress became the focus of attention of anarchist workers' organizations the world over. This was particularly true of those which comprise the sections of the International Workers' Association, (AIT) the anarcho-sindicalist international of which the CNT is the Spanish section. External delegations from the other AIT sections and non-AIT anarchist organizations totalled over 125 people.

The principal tasks before the CNT were its consolidation as an organization following the nightmare of nearly 40 years of Franco's fascist rule, the need to address itself to a social context dramatically different from that which existed at the time of the last congress in 1936 and the establishment of the course to be taken as it enters the 1980's.

This congress stood in stark contrast with the previous 1936 meeting

in Saragossa just prior to the July social revolution of the same year. Then the CNT had over 1.6 million members and was rivaled only in the working class movement by the Socialist General Union of Workers (UGT). The situation at the time was a pre-revolutionary one whereas today the class struggle in Spain is at a relatively low ebb.

These contrasts in organizational strength and the level of class struggle only begin to define the differences marked by the passing of time. The CNT has become a very different entity in so far as the majority of its members were born after the Spanish Civil War and the ensuing underground resistance of the 1940's. This largely youthful composition has presented the CNT with some very fundamental challenges which are interwoven with the re-organization process and the problems posed by the changed nature of Spanish society in general.

The CNT congress had to confront a lack of familiarity among the younger militants with procedural norms and consequent challenges to them. The heated debates over procedures consumed nearly three full days. But, once the procedural norms were straightened away the congress proceeded at a more rapid pace.

The challenges posed by many of these young militants involved



Delegates to the 5th Congress of the CNT gather at the main meeting

defining the very essence of what the CNT is. Most of the older militants maintain that the CNT while most of the younger militants, who are obviously more motivated by are obviously more motivated by

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the newer influences upon the anarchist movement, wish to see the CNT broaden its orientation. They believe the CNT must involve itself directly in what are termed "marginal" struggles. These include women's and gay liberation, opposition to nuclear technology, ecology, the prison movement and neighbourhood organizations.

Younger militants believe that the CNT must broaden its social base in order to remain socially relevant. That they take this position is hardly surprising. Simply stated, Spain has undergone a rapid social transformation into a highly urban, industrialized society. In little more than a decade the chaos of capitalist economic development has wrought on Spanish society the blight of major pollution problems, the insanity of consumerism and the spread of nuclear technology.

These two different conceptions of what the CNT should be came into focus in a twelve hour debate on the definition and tactics of anarcho-syndicalism. Interestingly, however, there were not two but three positions which emerged which blurred the differences between the young and old somewhat.

One position was that of classical anarcho-syndicalism. Its advocates favoured maintaining the definition and tactics of anarcho-syndicalism as they were elaborated in the 1930's. Significantly, this had the support of a sizeable proportion of younger militants in addition to the older militants.

Another position was also anarcho-syndicalist in perspective but with the added stipulation that anarcho-syndicalism's meaning and tactics were in need of revision to keep them contemporary. The third position was presented by a tendency which labels itself "revolutionary syndicalist" but is in fact not actually syndicalist at all. It would have the CNT evolve away from anarcho-syndicalism. In reality this tendency is composed of left communists, councilists and advocates

of neighbourhood assemblies.

Even though these important differences were elaborated it is crucial to understand that all sides in the debate share a commitment to the goal of libertarian communism. Furthermore, though the struggles which occurred on this and other questions were sharp to the point of spreading disillusionment among many and raising the spectre of a shattering split in the CNT, compromises were possible. The congress re-affirmed the classical definition of anarcho-syndicalism. But, this was simultaneous with a stated commitment by the CNT to help build a parallel libertarian movement encompassing the so-called marginal struggles.

Pressure Groups

The tendencies which clashed over the definition and tactics of anarcho-syndicalism are not the only ones functioning within the CNT. While in theory the CNT isn't supposed to have pressure groups within its ranks the truth of the matter is that it does.

The best known of these is the **Federation of Iberian Anarchists (FAI)** which has the explicit goal of keeping the CNT on an anarchist course. Another is the **Federation of Iberian Anarchist Groups (FIGA)**. The FIGA is quite small and is distinguished from the FAI principally by its enthusiasm for violent action the likes of which the FAI deems unsuitable in the present period. Still another is the **Federation of Autonomous Anarchist Groups (FAAG)**. It has a strong youth base primarily in Spain's northern regions and adheres to anarcho-communism.

The CNT exiles based in France continue to exert a significant influence as well. This is the case even though a CNT plenary of regional organizations made it clear that there is only one CNT, that which exists inside Spain.

The relationship of the CNT members in exile to the CNT in

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Spain wasn't an issue in the forefront of the congress' proceedings but did create some friction all the same. An important factor in this was the resentment felt by many young militants towards exiles like Frederica Montseny. They view her as a reformist who holds archaic and unsympathetic views regarding struggles such as those waged by women and gays. They also feel if her conception of the CNT were to prevail it would become a completely reformist union.

It is noteworthy that a previous source of internal conflict is a problem which seems more under control. This is the matter of other, fundamentally different social forces penetrating the CNT for their own purposes. These forces have included the left-liberals of the Spanish Communist Party, "anarcho-Christians" and Trotskyists.

Expelled

Of greater consequence was a manifestation of this phenomena some time ago involving a coalition of feminists, assemblyists, ecologists and others, who weren't necessarily anarchists, who constituted themselves into a formal organization united by the resolve to dramatically alter the nature of the CNT. In time, these people either left the CNT or were expelled.

While the decision to re-affirm the CNT as a labour union which is fostering the growth of a parallel libertarian movement was the most crucial policy decision made there were other important tasks taken up.

One of these was the debate over union contracts, an issue which revolved around the degree to which direct action tactics should be employed. The staunchest advocates of direct action see union contracts as mechanisms which tie workers to capitalism. At the same time those who advocate contracts being

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delegated by the regional organizations.

These outcomes of the congress, important though they are, will still be overshadowed by the simple fact of the congress being held and its agenda debated for eight long days, being completed to the satisfaction of most of those present. Given the fierce internal struggles which are generally acknowledged to have been a major obstacle to the CNT's growth within the Spanish working class, and which have caused it to lose some members, many feared the organization would break up completely. This didn't happen and consequently the CNT will remain the most powerful organization to the left of the Spanish Communist Party.

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signed believe they are necessary under present circumstances. On this question the congress did not make a decision clearly favouring either view. Rather, the implementation or rejection of contracts will be left to the discretion of local unions.

With respect to the next round of state-run union elections the CNT again plans to organize a boycott. It will similarly boycott the general agreement which has been reached between the Socialist Union, the UGT, and the government.

A new Secretary General was elected, José Buendía, who is a member of the Metalworkers Union in Madrid. Significantly, Buendía is an adherent of the classical anarcho-syndicalist conception of the CNT. He has replaced Enrique Marcos whose performance as Secretary General came under heavy criticism during the congress.

A related decision was to have the National Committee's location moved from Barcelona to Madrid. The people who will make it up along with Buendía will be



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