

The 5th CNT Congress

By Damien Rogers

The 5th Congress of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo of Spain got underway on December 8, 1979 in Madrid. The location was a municipal exhibition hall which the Madrid region CNT whipped into shape in a period of two weeks of cleaning and painting.

Juan Gomez Casas, a former general-secretary of the CNT, announced at an opening press conference that the CNT had 300,000 members of which 85,000 were militants. A total of 737 delegates from 450 unions met for the first time in full congress since the re-birth of the CNT inside Spain a few years ago. On the first day of the congress the syndicate Gastronomica de Madrid served 1,700 meals to the delegates and observers. The organization of the congress with its medical, information, press and food services was very well planned and worked out by the volunteers.

In an atmosphere of tension and uncertainty the CNT delegates faced a massive and complex eighteen point agenda that was scheduled to last eight days. Observers predicted that the CNT would tear itself apart during this congress because of internal disagreements. Other observers had predicted that the CNT would go reformist.

For the first three and a half days the congress moved at a snail's pace amid extraordinary verbal violence and procedural wrangling. Workers had not had the opportunity to work together in the setting of a large-scale libertarian congress before during this generation and consequently the practice of conducting such a meeting was unknown. They had not fought many workplace battles together since the CNT re-emerged, and had not co-ordinated their struggles together. In a word a whole vital common experience was missing.

Nevertheless by Tuesday December 11th most of the acrimony had subsided. Some 35-50 delegates had left the congress in disgust. But from that date on, the congress got down to dealing with the massive agenda in a systematic way. This agenda included items like: the procedures of the congress; principles,



tactics and goals of anarchosindicalism; the organizational basis of the CNT; a study of the actual national and international situation; labour and trade union strategy; press, propaganda and education; repression, the CNT and prisoners (the congress received messages of solidarity from the prisoners in the Segovia prison); the relationship of the CNT to other organizations; the position of the CNT before other issues — education, ecology, municipalities and neighbourhoods, health, etc.; an evaluation of the 1936-1939 period; and the election of a general-secretary.

Besides the tensions which arose as a result of the lack of a common experience as noted above, the congress atmosphere was also charged with the conflicting perspectives of some of the pressure groups inside and outside the CNT. These groups included various groups "in exile", the FAI and the FIGA from inside Spain as well as nationalist and Marxist influenced groups. The average age of a CNT worker is 25, and this presents tremendous problems. This young membership was attracted to the CNT because of a

rejection of the socialist and communist unions, for intellectual reasons, and because they were attracted by the CNT's militancy.

The question of what the basic philosophy of the CNT should be was dealt with as follows. A five person commission was elected which studied and synthesized all the mandates received from the various member syndicates. The commission thereafter submitted its report/document before the congress which adopted it after 12 hours of exhaustive debate. The 14 page document essentially took the 1936 Saragossa CNT congress declaration as its point of departure and then went on to elaborate what anarchosindicalism was for today and libertarian communism for tomorrow. The CNT congress by adopting this document clearly opted for the revolutionary tradition of anarchosindicalism.

A second controversial agenda was to be the CNT's relationship to the larger libertarian movement in Spain. Here the CNT congress decided it would remain a trade union movement first and foremost. Some unions wanted it to become a gen-

eralized libertarian movement incorporating the labour movement. While this position was rejected, the CNT pledged to help build up a parallel libertarian movement alongside itself, which it would help bring together and which would include the neighbourhood movement, ecology, women's, gay and other movements.

While the majority of the congress rejected the concept of collective-bargaining in favour of the anarchosindicalist concept of direct action some tolerance was shown to certain unions in certain federations (especially in the Madrid federation) who accepts shades of collective bargaining. Time and experience will sort this question out, was the feeling of some delegates.

The congress showed its weakness in dealing with several questions including international matters (while the AIT has now moved to Spain it is quite out of touch with labour insurgency in many countries), the attitude towards women is very immature and their role at the congress was marginal, a full ecology consciousness has yet to be developed, and the relationship be-

tween struggles in the workplace and with struggles in various places in society in general has still to be developed. During the congress mass demonstrations were taken place in Madrid and other cities.

Spain by students, provoked by police murder of three students. There is much conflict going within the education system in Spain. The police are still quite force apart from the influence of the politicians. The CNT was able to offer substantial support to the student movement during the events.

Most delegates I spoke to were satisfied with the 5th congress while admitting that a lot of ground had been lost by the CNT over the last year or so. Many people have turned their backs on the CNT. All sorts of radicals flocked to the CNT where re-emerged who it turns out either knew nothing of anarchosindicalism or were not interested in it, or wanted to develop a form of anarchism that bypassed the labour movement.

The coming year will have to be one of consolidation. The new national committee will be in Madrid with Pepe Bondia (from Madrid) as general secretary. The 6th congress will probably be in a year or so and should indicate how solid anarchosindicalism is in Spain. One factor became plain and that is that anarchism without an organized base in the labour movement cannot have a serious ongoing presence in so large.

Whatever the limitations of anarchosindicalism, the unfolding of the CNT congress was an extraordinary experience.

Concurrent with the congress the CNT organized a 'semana cultural' This cultural week held from December at the Teatro Arco drew some 10,000 persons who attended film sessions, musical evenings, live theater, debates, lectures on ecology, Bakunin, social activities, Kropotkin, the State apparatus, as well as other subjects.

Interview with an FAI Militant



The interview which follows is with a militant from the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) who has belonged to the FAI since 1936. It took place with the help of a translator shortly before the convening of the Fifth Congress of the National Confederation of Labour (CNT)

in Madrid. The name of the person interviewed is being withheld since the FAI is still an illegal organization.

Q. How would you describe the present situation regarding the development of the FAI?

A. The FAI almost disappeared

and at the moment is not very strong. At the moment what it is doing is trying to use its potential throughout the unions. The FAI would make no sense if the unions did not exist. It is within the unions where anarcho-syndicalists are formed. In this case the FAI is an extra power for the unions.

Q. What are the FAI's objectives in terms of helping to give direction to the CNT?

A. The FAI is willing that the CNT should follow the path of anarcho-syndicalism to reach libertarian communism in the last instance.

Q. Would you say the FAI's influence in the CNT is increasing?

A. It is increasing little by little, but it is increasing and one of the reasons is that among the CNT militants the ones involved in the FAI are almost the only ones who really behave as anarcho-syndicalists and who really are in the places where help and action are required.

Q. Are your gains in strength occurring particularly among young anarchists?

A. The increase in strength is mainly by gaining popularity among young militants.

Q. — Are there many active FAI members alive who were veterans of

the 1936 social revolution?

A. Very few. Most have died or were shot.

Q. Does the FAI have a clear position on the participation of CNT-FAI members in the bourgeois Republican Government during the Civil War?

A. Many take a critical view of this but others contend in that particular situation it was correct because to have refused would have left us with no control over the situation.

Q. Critics argue the CNT-FAI members should have known better; that the Communists are always bent on our destruction. How do you feel about this and the argument that collaboration necessarily constituted a betrayal of the oppressed?

A. We have always been aware of the Communist Party's intentions. Again, refusal would have left us more vulnerable and diminished the control we had over the situation. Regarding the betrayal, we do not consider it a betrayal because as a workers' organization we and any other organization had the responsibility to safeguard the interests of the working class. In that particular case, though it was a government or a revolutionary committee, any

such organization had the responsibility to participate in either kind of government because having been away from the government that responsibility could have been even greater since the possibilities for controlling the situation would have been very scarce.

Q. How do you feel about the practicality of having formed a military alliance instead, in particular with the more left-wing elements of the Socialist General Union of Workers (UGT)?

A. Most of the top ranks of the Socialist Party were being absorbed by the Communist Party in the Government. Collaboration militarily between the UGT rank and the anarchists was already a fact.

A strictly military alliance made no sense. In July, 1936 even, the forces of the revolution did not have enough strength to fully consolidate the revolution and had to look for help from others and only the Russians would provide it. The in turn supplied it through the Spanish Communist Party which led to the growth of its power.

Q. In effect you are saying that the isolation of the revolution and its

See FAI Page 13

FAI Interview

Continued from Page 12.

adequate international solidarity made collaboration with the pro-Soviet Communist Party unavoidable?

A. Yes. But it was also the case that the government of the Republic was unable to buy arms anywhere and it had to rely on the Russians to act as an intermediary in buying them.

Q. Do you think that because of what took place then the CNT and the FAI would be much more resistant to any such approval in the future?

A. Nowadays, we are much more careful about collaborating with anyone else no matter what politics they claim to have. We know very well that they try to use us. They are only willing to co-operate with us when it serves their interests.

Q. Now I wish to deal more with the current situation. In your view, what are the prospects for the CNT and particularly the FAI in the coming period?

A. As far as the CNT is concerned this depends primarily upon the outcome of the congress. The last congress was held a long time ago.

As far as the FAI is concerned we cannot consider such a short period because we have to bear in mind,

that the FAI is increasing at the moment and that the FAI groups are mainly in the cities. So our goal is to extend activity to the countryside where the revolution has to occur in the first instance.

Q. Do you have any thoughts you wish to address to anarchists in North America?

A. Anarchism grows up from and within the working class. Anarchism does not grow from small or big groups of intellectuals who sit down in a café and just work out a theoretical point of view of how anarchist behavior should be. It has to start and grow mainly among the working class.

Postscript: The History of the FAI is a new book by Juan Gomex Casas, the former Secretary General of the CNT. At this time it is only available in Spanish. Persons interested in obtaining a copy should send \$6.00 US to: ZXY, S.A. Lerida 82, Madrid-20, Spain.