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Workers' Collectives during the Spanish Revolution

Salomé Moltó

translated by Kathrin Hrdy

Transcription of a video by O. Ressler, recorded in Alcoy, Spain, 22 min., 2004

My name is Salomé Moltó. Since 1977, I have been a member of the national confederation of workers. I still work for the trade union today and I am in charge of different areas.

On 14 April 1931, Spain was proclaimed a Republic. The king stepped down and society began to form itself differently from what the Spanish people had been used to. There was a period of right-wing government followed by a leftist government; the former was referred to as the “two black years,” a two-year period in which the right wing governed. In 1936, when the Spanish voted for the *Frente Popular*, the left-wingers returned to the government, triggering off military revolts and uprisings, which began on 18 July 1936. At first the economy was quite fair, but afterwards the right wing boycotted the whole economy and only rarely participated in economic investments. Consequently, the

factories were not working at full capacity and there was an enormous reduction in the economy as the population worked less and earned less. This process began in 1936, when the *Frente Popular* took over the government. This was the Republic of the Left Wing as we call it, yet the population continued to be in quite a depressed situation.

In 1984, I did a study on workers' collectives and nationalization in Alcoy. This book explains what I studied because it was a journalistic matter, whereby I interviewed many different people to know exactly what their experiences reveal. On 18 July, a general strike was called and a controlling commission was established. The controlling commission was organized by the trade union CNT holding the majority in Alcoy and by the OGT, which participated as well. Although in terms of percentages, its participation was far lower, it was also part of what was called "The Control." The Control was a type of committee in which all trade unions were united and which took charge of the economy. What did they do? They nationalized transport, and the metal, textiles and paper industries. It was in this building, which is emblematic of that time, that paper was produced. From that moment on, the Control governed Alcoy.

What happened to the economy? The collective reunited the whole transport system, even hair salons, banks, that is to say everyone had a job and received 10 Pesetas per day. It was the same as a soldier would receive if he voluntarily participated in the war to stop the fascist movement. Alcoy experienced a very dramatic moment because there were barracks full of soldiers. The soldiers were the sons of the men who were in front of the barracks waiting for the decision of the armed forces: whether they would support the fascist rebellion or if the nation would form an alliance. After long negotiations, the barracks opened their doors and fathers and

sons could embrace each other. Without a doubt it would have been a dramatic situation if there had been bloodshed. Alcoy remained a Republic and a great number of volunteers united to fight and stop fascism in Alcoy.

In Spain, there were many national formations. Catalonia was nearly completely nationalized, also many provinces of Aragon and, in particular, Alcoy. Alcoy was emblematic because of the way in which the communist party had brought about the downfall of the collectives; in Alcoy, they could not do it. They ordered the SIM, which was a task force of the military, to remove the collectives but they could not do it. First of all, they could not do it because the metalwork industry produced war material and they had to respect their war material or the people of Alcoy would have sabotaged the whole process. Second, there was the textile industry, which produced the military's clothes. So how did they carry out nationalization? The controlling commission marched off to the Ministry of War in Madrid and asked for permission to make arms for the Republic. The ministry of war accepted their plea so the people of Alcoy could work 24 hours a day in eight-hour shifts. Everyone started to work; people even came from far away as there was a lack of workers due to the number of men who had left to fight at the front. So how did they carry out the nationalization? First, the system was divided into the jobs which were necessary to produce the things they wanted to produce. Workers received the same amount of money for simple jobs as for jobs which required more responsibility. I talked to someone who was affected by this, he was a technical worker in the production of bombs, and he told me that his boss, who was an engineer and the owner of the factory where he worked, had the same status as the other workers. So that's how the work was structured.

The collectives in Alcoy were complete. They included all of the metalwork industry, the whole textile industry, the hair salons, the cafés, all of the banks, everything was united. Everyone did his/her job and the assembly determined what had to be done at a specific moment.

The economy, at that time, did not aim at personal enrichment. People simply had their salary, which was nearly the same as anyone else's. From the bottom to the top, income could increase to a certain extent due to the fact that there was a war. Many people were day laborers earning ten Pesetas a day, which was a good income and stayed like that during the entire period. First, they made use of the stores to get hold of material and cover their needs. Second, there was a need for exchange. Alcoy, for instance, sent machines to produce oil or similar utensils to neighboring villages and received vegetables, meat, and other necessities in return.

No one was forced to join the collectives but everyone was eager to do so because it signified a higher income, your needs were covered and apart from that, if a system of that kind is afoot, it is not a small percentage of the population which supports it but 99 percent of the nation. One part of the patrons were either at the front, had disappeared or had stayed at home. The CNT went to their homes and gave them an identity card and a job. As far as repression was concerned, they did some crazy things with regard to personal affairs; but, in general, there was no bloodshed in Alcoy. There was only one incident where a man, who the day before had been the manager of a firm, was given a different job in the same firm.

What is important is how those people organized themselves. First of all, taking responsibility for the firm, they decided what the firm

produced: Whether the firm produced war material or machines – before war material, Alcoy had produced wine presses and oil presses, which they had sold abroad. There was a complete change. The firms would not produce oil anymore, so Alcoy stopped producing presses and instead started making war material. What united the people was the order. They were asked to produce a certain amount of a material; for example, buses or grenades. They would all work and rebuild the machines so that they could carry out the order. Everyone had to take responsibility for their specific job. What was unusual about those jobs was that they were not permanent, but each person was directed or directed someone else. Usually when you got to work, they asked you to volunteer for a job. If nobody volunteered, they were urged to take responsibility. However, those posts were revocable at any time. If a worker did not fulfill expectations, he or she immediately left the post and started to work in a new post. Consequently, workers were versatile; they could work in any position and that was important. They were able to work on the milling machine as well as adjust things or work as a packer. That way the workers did not concentrate only on their specific job but were also prepared to learn new functions in order to produce the desired goods.

If you compare our present-day society to the one I have studied, it becomes apparent that there is a big difference. First, the value ascribed to a person has changed. Nowadays we have some specialists but the majority of the people are proletarianized. In other words, workers are automated. They understand neither why they are doing something nor the mechanism which lies behind it. In former times, workers not only understood their own jobs but also their colleagues' jobs. Consequently, they could switch their jobs at any time and occupy different posts without any difficulties. This was the structure at that time. In regard to difficulties, there

are always some people who are opponents and people who cooperate with each other. But if a person knows about the importance of their work, they will automatically take on an opponent and collaborate; so that in the end, the result of the joint effort is positive. I think that this was a type of strength, which gained acceptance with those men – to know that the work of each person was important and necessary to achieve the common goal.

One very important thing was that every section of the controlling commission had significant representation and the responsibility to administer the whole of society. There was the metalwork industry which produced war material, the textile industry and the paper industry. This building was emblematic with its offices on top and, on the ground floor, the workrooms for the production of paper, for instance, the famous cigarette paper "Bambú." I think that everyone has heard of "Bambú." What is important is that, they not only maintained the factory for the three years of war, providing them with food; but, at the end of the war, they had a profit of 5,000 million Pesetas in the bank. This is significant. Moreover, all of the workrooms were completely renovated and the machines were in perfect order. When the patrons returned to their firms, they had a hard time closing the doors of the safes because the banknotes were pressed so tightly against them.

The situation for women changed a little bit. At that time, women had a secondary position. It was through this revolution that women realized their situation; they became more independent and more active, not only in the factories where arms were produced, but also in other collectives such as administration or nurseries. A radical change commenced with great intent. At that time, Frederica Montseny was the health minister. Women obtained the right of divorce and abortion and they carried out many projects to eliminate the enormous disadvantages women had experienced

until that time. It was through war that the situation of women changed; because, before that, the Republic had not cared much about them.

For me, the most important factors in an alternative society are solidarity, equality, and mutual respect. This clearly would put an end to rivalry and it would contrast the belief that every single person regards him/herself to be more important and talented than the rest. We are multifold and diverse and this diversity has to be consolidated in support, solidarity, and mutual respect. If not, living together in society becomes virtually unbearable. In reality, life continues to be defined by egoism and thus we have the results we have. In a society defined by solidarity, a person who has the ability to do something can help someone who has difficulties fulfilling a task and thus they express their solidarity. This would steadily lead to the elimination of egoism, envy, and restlessness, which dominate society today, make us confront each other and result in people violently destroying each other. I count on a society which is peaceful, progressive, and respectful.

How would we structure a new society, an anarchist society? First of all, the most important element is to analyze the territory, the climate, what it can produce and the number of people this region can maintain. For the administration of this region and what it is able to produce, those men and women who live in a specific region need to know how to manage themselves, not only to create wealth but also how to manage it. Politically speaking, there would be federations, regions that would be united. The trade union is organized in the following way: Each scope of work is divided into sections and each section occupies and is responsible for their field. This way, each region would really have to take responsibility for their reality and their problems, which they would have to solve. If they were not able to deal with their problems, they would have to

ask another region for help in order to get over their crisis. In this way, every region could compensate for the shortages they have.

It is true that the period we have looked at – the period from 1936 until 1939 – was a very violent period because we were at war. But the people who were in charge of the collectives were not violent. They carried out the collectives without violence, thus demonstrating that with good organization and with moral and ethical values and solidarity it is possible to achieve the same or even more than with weapons. I would say that you can achieve much more. This is my opinion. So that a small group, which gets together, is able to have the same rights, the same obligations and the same solidarity between each other. That is what this society is trying to destroy, not only the human being, but also the human being within a social group.

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