

The civil war in Spain

The civil war, which began with the revolt of July 18th, is, at the time of writing, still dragging on without either side having gained decisive victory. What the outcome will be it is still impossible to say, for the issue depends to a great extent on the assistance given to the rebels by foreign governments. Before examining the struggle from the Socialist standpoint, we may pay tribute to the conduct of the Spanish workers. Believing that a vital principle was at stake, they rallied to the Government against a powerful revolt backed by the greater part of the armed forces. Workers, with little or no military training, stood up to trained and experienced soldiers. On the one side was all the advantage of organisation and equipment, and on the other the enthusiasm and voluntary discipline of a popular movement. It is true that large sections of the military forces remained loyal to the Government, but even these were hampered by treason and sabotage among the officers. Only the untrained volunteer militias were thoroughly dependable. The Madrid correspondent of the *Economist* (London, August 15th, 1936) was moved to admiration and wrote: "The splendid way in which the citizens of Madrid rushed to arms was a fine page in the history of democracy."

He pointed out something else deserving of notice:-

As far as Madrid is concerned, discipline has been excellent. In the early days, when almost every working man in Madrid had a rifle in hand, the jewellers' shops were open as usual, with their windows full of valuables, without the slightest attempt at theft being registered.

If the workers attacked churches, "that was", he said, "because of the close political connection between the clericals and the Conservatives."

So much for the conduct of the Spanish workers. What of the wisdom of their action in rallying to a purely capitalist government in order to defend it against a military, aristocratic and clerical rebellion?

The Need for Democracy

It has always been recognised by Socialists that it is necessary for the workers to gain the vote, so that they may be able to place themselves democratically in control of the machinery of government. Marx was one who recognised this.

At first sight the Spanish struggle appears to be simply a struggle of this kind, and many people have indeed represented it to be. When, however, all the facts are taken into account, the position is by no means simple and straight-forward.

The recent political history of Spain dates from 1931, when the Monarchical Government was overthrown, undermined by its own corruption and decay. At the first democratic election the Spanish Labourites (the so-called Socialist Party) obtained 117 seats out of 470, and three of their representatives entered the first provisional Government in coalition with various other parties. The Government introduced a number of important pieces of legislation providing for the division of the big landed estates among the land-workers and peasants, the disestablishment of

the Catholic Church, divorce laws, an educational system to remove the appalling illiteracy, and the grant of a wide measure of autonomy to Catalonia. The last-named law is to be explained largely by the fact that Catalonia contains (in and around Barcelona) a big share of Spain's industrial concerns, the owners of which have interests opposed to those of the land-owners, the Catholic organisations, the military cliques and the Conservative traders of Seville and elsewhere. The aim of the Republican Government, in brief, was to change the constitution and governmental system of Spain in the direction of capitalist development. From the first they faced the wealthy, powerful and ruthless opposition both of the representatives of the old order, who are able to appeal to the ignorance of the priest-ridden sections of the population, 60 per cent of which is rural, and also of new groups preaching some kind of Fascism, who can attract quite a number of idealistic young people with promises of the rebirth of a unified powerful Spain.

The Coalition Government did not last for long. The Monarchists and military groups recovered their courage, and, at the same time, dissension arose between the Labourites and other workers' groups, and the frankly capitalist parties. The latter felt that they no longer had need to rely on the organised workers and pay a certain price for their support.

At the General Election in November, 1933, the Labourites lost heavily and came back with only 61 seats.

The next development was an abortive military coup by workers' organisations and Catalan separatists in October, 1934, in answer to the inclusion of three Catholics of Fascist sympathies in the Cabinet. As was inevitable, the revolt was crushed by the Government without difficulty, but with great brutality. Some 30,000 workers were imprisoned and held there throughout 1935. Indeed they were not released until the victory of the "Popular Front" at the election in February, 1936, the indignation caused by their imprisonment and ill-treatment being one of the factors which helped the Popular Front to win.

The Popular Front at the General Election, February, 1936

The reasons for the electoral victory of the Popular Front were many, but outstanding among them were the following. First, dissatisfaction with the results of two years of Conservative Catholic rule, and the disclosure of financial scandals affecting members of the Government. Then the fact that the reforms begun by the first Republican administration were not only not carried through but had been largely undone. Most important of all, however, was the electoral pact between a number of organisations hitherto bitterly hostile to each other. The Popular Front consisted of the following large or fair-sized parties, together with several smaller ones (the figures are the seats won at the election in February, 1936): Labourites (about 96), Left Republicans (80), Republican Union (32), Esquerra (Catalonian Party—20), Communists (16). Above all, this was the first time that the Syndicalists, who normally oppose all political action, had voted at an election. Another contributory cause for the Popular Front victory was the shocking poverty of the land-workers, aggravated by wage reductions enforced under the former Government. The Popular Front undertook to raise wages if they got power.

The outcome was that the Popular Front obtained a total of about 265 seats, to 148 for the Right group and 55 for the Centre group. Even so the total votes obtained by Popular Front candidates were slightly fewer than those given to the candidates of the Right and Centre together—4,357,000 to 4,571,000. (*Daily Herald*, February 27th, 1936).

The new Government was entirely a capitalist-Republican one, under Senor Azana of the Left Republican Party. It took office pledged to introduce certain reforms, but without any suggestion of trying or even desiring to help Socialism. As Senor Azana constantly said in his election speeches, "I am not a Socialist and I am not a socialisator." (*Manchester Guardian*, February 27th.)

The Government contained not one Labourite, Communist, Syndicalist, Anarchist or Trotskyite. All its members were avowed supporters of capitalism. In addition to being pledged to carry through the reforms introduced by the first Republican Government, the Azana Government proposed to introduce an income tax and to bring the banking system under Government control.

The Government Faces Revolt

No sooner did the Government take office than it received due warning that the military-clerical-Fascist groups would not accept their electoral defeat as in any way binding on them. They do not pretend to have any time for democracy and majority rule, as was admitted by General Franco, leader of the present revolt, to a *News Chronicle* representative on July 28th. When asked "What about the February elections? Didn't they represent the national will?" Franco's contemptuous reply was, "Elections never do." (*News Chronicle*, July 29th, 1936.)

Thus it was that General Franco and General Godet (the latter was executed in Barcelona on August 11th for his part in the new revolt) staged an unsuccessful rising in February, immediately the election results were known. The revolt was crushed, but the Government, either through negligence or fear, allowed these and other known rebels to continue to occupy influential officials positions in Majorca, Morocco and elsewhere, positions which they used to prepare a more powerful rising.

In the five months after taking office, the Azana Government was faced with individual acts of terrorism by military and semi-Fascist organisations, which were replied to in a similar way by those workers' organisations which have long preached and practised violence—the Syndicalists and Anarchists. Two culminating incidents were the assassination of Senor Costillo, Lieutenant of the Shock Police, by Fascists, and the counter-assassination of Calvo Sotelo, self-styled future dictator and rebel leader. It is believed that the rebellion was planned for July 25th, but was brought forward a week owing to the assassination of Sotelo.

The rebels took with them the greater part of the army—officered largely by men belonging to the landed aristocracy—and part of the navy. The Government kept the support of most of the air force, part of the navy, some of the rank and file of the army, and the greater part of the Civil Guard (a military police force). The rebels had the backing of the land-owners and the Catholic Church, itself the biggest land-owner of all, and also the backing (probably in advance of the event) of the German and Italian governments, interested in the promise of naval bases in Morocco, the Canary

Islands, and Majorca, if Franco won. The *Daily Telegraph* (supporting the rebels) reported that General Franco was building up a new air force during the first weeks of August with "modern German and Italian 'planes and personnel", and the latest types of German anti-aircraft guns. (*Daily Telegraph*, August 13th, 1936.) The Government in Barcelona unearthed in the headquarters of the German Nazi organisation there evidence of a widespread Nazi organisation in Spain. (*News Chronicle*, August 19th and 20th.)

As regards the objects of the rebels, the rebellion can be described in the main as a landed-class revolt against the agrarian reforms (splitting up of their estates among the land-workers), aided by the Catholic Church, military group, and by organisations with more or less Fascist outlook. The last-named are, however, at present probably the least important. The rebel movement, as a whole, and even its Fascist wing, bears little resemblance to Italian Fascism and German Nazism, with their popular appeal, fake-Socialist phraseology, and considerable working class support.

The dictatorships in Germany and Italy—and especially Portugal—have other reasons for being interested in the future Government of Spain. Undoubtedly the revival of workers' confidence and activity in the French stay-in strikes, the Popular Fronts, and the Spanish militias, are having repercussions in Portugal, and even Italy and Germany. It is probably not a coincidence that extensive wage increases are being granted by Mussolini's Government just now.

Spain's Divided Working Class

If the rebels represent more than one point of view, the Popular Front militias are an example of the temporary unity of very divergent forces. Catalonian capitalist-Republicans and Catholic-Conservative Basque nationalists join hands with Labourites, who stand for democratic government, constitutional action and social reform, and with Anarchists and Syndicalists who reject political action and the need to capture the State-machine, oppose centralised organisation and favour local self-governing "Communes", and whose traditional methods are sabotage, insurrection by strikes, and gunman tactics. In addition there are Communists and Trotskyites, bitterly opposed to each other but agreed in favouring a strong centralised State based on dictatorship.

As regards relative strengths of the workers' groups, the General Union of Workers (UGT), which supports the Labourites, has about 1½ million adherents, and is the strongest trade union organisation everywhere, except in Barcelona. Their political reflection, the Labourites (themselves divided into "Left" and "Right" Wings), are the strongest party in Parliament, with about 96 members. (The next largest was the CEDA, led by the Conservative Gil Robles.)

The Anarcho-Syndicalist National Confederation of Labour (CNT) has about 500,000 members. Although it has recently grown, it is far below its former strength. Its great stronghold is Barcelona.

The Communists and Trotskyites each have perhaps 50,000 members. The Anarchists, especially in Catalonia, have their own organisation with a large following.

These fundamental divergences of aim and method naturally have serious consequences. In the first place, their very existence was a factor which emboldened the rebels and encouraged them to launch their attack. They calculated, not without reason, that such a mixed Popular Front would soon show signs of disintegration. Dissensions have indeed occurred. The Syndicalists, while reluctantly supporting the "Front" at the elections, and joining the militias, still declined to collaborate with capitalist bodies in the government of Catalonia. (*Manchester Guardian*, August 8th.) Also, being strongly opposed to the idea of dictatorship, they mistrust and are hostile to the Communists and Trotskyites. Even in the midst of the civil war the leader of the dockers in the General Workers' Union at Barcelona was assassinated with two of his colleagues. As they were Labour Party sympathisers, and had a long-standing quarrel with the Anarcho-Syndicalist CNT, it was taken for granted that the latter were settling old scores. (*Manchester Guardian*, August 7th.) The past history of the murderous antagonisms between these bodies would make such an action by no means surprising. The Labour Unions protested and were met with the threats of violence. It may be mentioned that the Anarcho-Syndicalists have no reason to love the so-called "Socialist" Party, which coquetted with the dictator Primo de Rivera when he was suppressing them ten years ago.

(In passing, it is interesting to notice the remark of a *Times* correspondent that the customary discipline of the Labourites and Communists in the militias made them more effective as fighting men than the Syndicalists and Anarchists, whose disbelief in organisation resulted in their suffering great losses in action.—*Times*, August 6th.)

The Trotskyites continued to deride Parliament, criticise the Government and demand a dictatorship.

The disunity of method, organisation and object of the Spanish workers are important from another point of view. We may readily grant, with Marx, that workers *seeking democracy* have an interest in striving, as well as the capitalists, to overthrow military, Monarchical or autocratic Government, but Marx certainly never envisaged a situation in which not only were the workers' groups bitterly hostile to each other, but many of them (in Spain possibly a majority) are not aiming at democracy at all, having no inclination for it. Should the Communists or Trotskyites gain power they would, as in Russia, promptly and ruthlessly suppress democracy, and along with it the Labourites, Syndicalists and Anarchists. The latter two groups, whatever Government is in power, will continue to do their utmost by strikes, sabotage, and even assassination, to destroy it, even at the cost of producing chaos.

The truth is—and the Spanish workers have got to learn it before they can hope to make progress in organising for the conquest of power for Socialism—that Socialism is at present absolutely out of the question, and that their only present hope is for the right to organise and carry on Socialist propaganda under capitalist democracy. Trying to go beyond this (or in the case of the Anarcho-Syndicalists, trying to go backwards) by means of armed revolts, and so on, will gain nothing except disillusionment, and will not help the working class or the Socialist movement.

Things to be Remembered

For reasons of space, it is impossible to deal at length with many important aspects of the struggle, but certain points and certain facts deserve to be touched upon or recorded.

First, there were the atrocity stories and the outrageous misrepresentations of sections of the English Press, notably the Rothermere organs, and *The Time* and *Daily Telegraph*.

Lord Rothermere's journals openly sided with the rebels, whom they described as patriots and Christians. His *Evening News* (August 4th) actually charged the "Reds" with being responsible for plunging Spain into a "blood bath". By the "Reds" it meant the Spanish capitalist-Republican Government, but the Rothermere press consistently hid the facts of that Government's composition. The same paper (August 3rd) demanded a Fascist victory as the only way of "saving" Spain and justified the rebellion on the extraordinary plea that the Government's defensive measures against the rebels ("orgy of slaughter and rapine") would have been launched "whether there had been a Fascist rising or not".

Needing to hide the fact that the rebels were largely dependent on Mohammedan Moors in the Foreign Legion and Riff regiments, trained in savage fighting methods, in order to bolster up the claim that the rebels represented Christianity the *Evening News* (August 8th) avoided disclosing that they were Moors. Instead they were described as Franco's "men from Morocco".

The Times, with typical craft, dodged standing frankly as the supporter of rebels against a democratically elected Government by maintaining—without any evidence—that the conflict was bound to result in "a despotism either of the Left or of the Right" and that the Government side was becoming "violently Marxist" (*Times*, July 29th); this in spite of the fact that its own correspondent was well enough informed to know, as everybody else knows, that the Anarcho-Syndicalists are anti-Marxists (August 11th), and in spite of *The Times's* own admission (July 29th) that "Perhaps a majority" of the Government's armed supporters were neither Labourites nor Anarcho-Syndicalists, but "members of less extreme groups", i. e., capitalist-Republicans, Catholic-Nationalists, or pure and simple democrats.

Another *Times* trick was to describe the rebels as "anti-Government troops", and the Government troops as "an armed mob". (See *Times*, August 1st.)

Such misrepresentation, extending in the Rothermere Press to unashamed lying, is what the workers may always expect from some at least of the organs of capitalist interests.

Two important points which emerge from the struggle relate to the importance of having control of the machinery of Government, which has been consistently stressed by the SPGB. In Vienna in February, 1934, and in Spain in October, 1934, workers' armed revolts against the Government were easily crushed. In Spain, even if the Government is eventually defeated owing to the intervention of Italy and Germany, enough has happened to show that control of the machinery of Government would have gained the day against the rebels, even though they were backed by a large part of the military forces.

The second point is that we can see from Spain how easy it would have been to crush Fascism in Italy in 1922 if the Italian Government at that time had wanted to—which, of course, it did not. Mussolini's rabble could have been dispersed in a few hours, as the military authorities there said at the time.

The dependence of the Spanish rebels on outside aid and the inability of the international working class to give any effective assistance to the Government is worth nothing. Collections of money (insignificant in amount except that arranged in Russia by the Government) can make little difference in such a case.

This brings us to the utter futility of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Aware, in spite of themselves, of their impotence, all they could do, apart from making collections, was to appeal for the summoning of Parliament, which they so often declared to be useless (*Daily Worker*, August 8th); appeal for the sending of a co-operative food ship, which the Co-operative Societies refused to do; appeal to the Tory Government to help the Spanish Government (they called it "demanding and resolving to enforce our will that the National Government shall give to the elected People's Government of Spain the help it needs". (*Daily Worker*, August 10th); and to demand "a mighty campaign everywhere in Britain. Meetings, meetings, meetings, in streets and halls and schools . . . resolutions, protests, collections for the Spanish people . . . writing to the local Press, to the local Council, to the local MPs (*Daily Worker*, August 11th.) In other words no action of any moment, but simply endless varieties of talk. What we witnessed here was a repetition of the Communist Party's futile gestures of help for Abyssinia. Perhaps the crowning absurdity of the Communists, in view of the League fiasco over Abyssinia, was that they proposed calling the League in to "help" Spain!

Atrocity-Mongering

It is impossible to deny that cruelties, apart from the destruction of the war itself, occurred on both sides. In view, however, of the one-sided or lying reports in many organs of the English Press the following statements are worth recording. It cannot be doubted that the rebels deliberately perpetrated far more ghastly atrocities than anything the Government militia's were guilty of as acts of revenge or reprisal.

When Moorish troops captured Badajoz they slaughtered 2,000 Government troops in cold blood, or, as their commander, Colonel Yaque, said: "Perhaps not quite as many as that." (*News Chronicle*, August 17th.)

The Daily Telegraph (August 15th) reported from their own correspondent that the rebels at the Montana barracks, in Madrid, three times showed the white flag of surrender and each time opened fire under cover of it on the Government forces which came to accept the surrender.

Reuters' correspondent (*Daily Herald*, July 28th) was told by a rebel legionary that they had "been strictly instructed not to take any prisoners but to cut off the heads of all Communists."

Jay Allen, *News-Chronicle* correspondent (August 12th), stated that the rebel Foreign Legion "are leaving a trail of blood and villages in ruin behind them."

The Times correspondent at Malaga reported (August 8th) that 900 Royalist and other rebel prisoners there "are not only safe but in tolerable comfort". Only some five or six, after summary trial, were shot.

On August 14th the British colony in Madrid sent a telegram to the English Foreign Office indignantly repudiating "hysterical stories published in the British Press by refugees from here". The telegram was signed by six business men, and said that none of the British colony had ever been in the slightest danger. Reuter's Madrid correspondent reported (*Manchester Guardian*, August 15th): "there have been, as far as anyone knows, no atrocities here." The same, according to the *Manchester Guardian*, was true of Malaga. The BBC had repeated refugee stories, alleging numerous atrocities at Malaga, but when the *Guardian's* special correspondent in Andalusia investigated he "found them to be untrue".

One incident deserves to be recorded. Mr Winston Churchill wrote an article on Spain in the *Evening Standard* on August 10th. In it he made the interesting admission that in his view a constitutional, parliamentary Government is only deserving of allegiance if it "prove itself capable of preserving law and order, and protecting life, freedom and property" (italics ours).

We think we are not misrepresenting this capitalist politician's outlook when we read into it that he claims the right to stage a pro-capitalism rebellion when a Socialist majority have obtained control of Parliament in a constitutional way. Socialists will remember this.

Regarding the future of Spain it can be said with certainty that whichever side wins the present civil war, the matter will not end at once. The defeated will be awaiting a further opportunity of appealing to arms. Also it may be taken for granted that whether the Government forces or the rebels come out on top they will seek to disarm the workers.

It need hardly be added that the only ultimate solution for class-conflict and unrest in Spain, as elsewhere, lies in Socialism.

(September 1936)