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THE DOCKERS HAVE WON... ROUND 1

Now that Contenemar has finally backed down and signed an agreement to not implement the 'socialist' government's decree privatising the country's docks this seems like a good time to review what has (up to now) been a success story in terms of rank and file trade unionism unequalled in Europe for the last ten years.

Under Franco the docks were completely integrated into the state with compulsory membership of the official workers' organisation (the FNS) which was at the service of the government. During the last years of the dictatorship the FNS was infiltrated by radical elements who, following a 21 day strike in 1976, forced it's dissolution and began forging a union which now represents over 80% of the the country's dockers and is known as La Co-ordinadora (C-O). The C-O has put up a successful struggle against attacks by governments of left and right using a structure based (in theory and in practice) on open assemblies of all dockers. It was first started in Barcelona, which is still it's most dynamic branch, and today carries out in practice the same policies that the CNT can largely only call for, in terms of industrial organisation.

The first serious attack on the C-O was made by the UCD, the 'centerist' government which took over after Franco and contained many of his ex-ministers. In 1980-81 an 18 month strike defeated their attempts to privatise the docks as a way to break the C-O and suck more profit out of the workers.

In April 1986 the 'socialist' party, the PSOE (whose government has already carried out an industrial 'restructuring' programme which Thatcher would envy) announced a new decree to privatise the docks. Two things were against them. Firstly, unlike say the steel industry, Spain's docks are still a vital part of the government's economic plans, as 94% of all exports go through them, so the effects of any industrial action is quickly felt. Secondly the UGT (the PSOE's puppet union) has got virtually no presence in any significant port except Bilbao.

If carried out the privatisation decree will dissolve the OTP (a body like the NCB, or more exactly the National Docks Labour Board) and replace it with a series of 'consejos estatales' or state councils, a total of 27 to cover most of the countries 52 ports. This is obviously a question of 'divide and rule' as the C-O would then effectively face 27 different bosses each making different agreements.

As well as making a third of the country's 13,500 dockers redundant, it would give rise to four different classes of docker where at present there is only one - 'registered dockers'. These would be:

1. The 'blue eyed boys' who would be permanent employees of individual companies.
2. Second class dockers employed by the state councils.
3. A pool of occasional workers.
4. Workers from INEM, Spain's equivalent to the MSC.

Obviously 3. and 4. would be desperate unskilled and unorganised workers, or even professional scabs who are members of fascist organisation, as have been used recently.

This caste system, which would undermine the bargaining power of even those in class 1., is in sharp contrast to the conditions the dockers have achieved by their struggles to date. At the moment all dockers belong to a body of skilled professionals with secure jobs who rotate the available work amongst themselves so that any spell of unemployment is short lived and evenly spread - obviously a boss's nightmare in terms of the solidarity it generates.

On May 23rd, 1986, the decree of privatisation was passed by the Spanish parliament and this was met by a national dock strike from the 3rd to the 13th of June.

The government fixed on a company called Contenemar (Con) to spearhead the implementation of its decree as it is a purely national company (which nevertheless employs over 3,000 workers) and it owes the government 7,000 million pts (£35 million) in social security payments so it can be pressurised. The other companies would obviously take their lead from Con, so the struggle against them became a test case. A national overtime ban against Con was started on August 29th, 1986 and on October 15th this became an all-out strike.

Despite only one of its 8 amendments to the decree being accepted the UGT signed an accord on November 3rd accepting privatisation, but this was shown to be a worthless piece of paper when a secret ballot of the country's dockers, organised by the C-O and answered by 64% of those eligible, rejected the governments plans by 95 to 5%. The strike continued.

Following a bitter campaign of direct action involving many injuries and confrontations, Con finally gave in on February 29th, 1987, and signed an agreement with the C-O saying it would stop trying to work with non registered dockers, ie giving up its attempt to implement the privatisation decree.

8 workers in Las Palmas, Teneriffe and Barcelona who had been sacked were reinstated on the first day of a series of strikes on their behalf - April 21st.

At the moment the privatisation decree is meaningless and ineffectual, but the PSOE has not given up. Their next tactic is to try and get the state councils off the ground, but this is already behind schedule. So far the score is PSOE: 0, Co-ordinadora 1, but 1½ hours is 90 minutes (as they say in football commentary) and the game is not over yet...

Towards the end of '86 I was able to get a small sample of what the C-O means at grassroot level when I attended one of the ordinary assemblies which are held weekly in Barcelona. Once again I was struck by the fact that an organisation cannot be considered properly without taking into account its culture, and in the case of the C-O I was very impressed

I usually find meetings boring, but this one was different. There were between about 20 and 30 people present during the meeting and although about 6 of them did most of the talking almost everyone said something at some point. It did get a bit heated at times but even in the middle of all this there might be a few seconds silence because someone had stopped in mid sentence to consider his next words. For some reason it seemed very easy for people to break in on whatever topic was being discussed even though people usually talked pretty fast. At some points I thought a serious confrontation was building up, then next thing everyone was laughing.

In short, I'd come across a group of sane human beings and I went away more convinced by some of the things we say about 'proletarian culture'.

HOW ARE WE DOING?

By way of balance I'll end this article with a short piece that was published in La Estiba no.21 in which a docker airs his criticisms of the C-O. I'm always willing to give a high profile to any examples of self-criticism as a counter to the universal tendency to suppress such things. This 'bias' on my part should be borne in mind by any reader looking for an 'objective' impression of what's going on in Spain.

It is exactly now, when the struggle is at its most severe that participation, information, discussion and criticism (in short the assembly) becomes all important.

There is no room for ideas about 'convenience' in an organisation which was made by the practice of direct democracy; no leaders, no led.

When people say we should not put out certain information because it may be taken wrongly; when we hold international congresses behind closed doors and accommodate those who don't want criticism from the grassroots; when it is difficult to find people to form a slate at election time; when every list, meeting, event appears in hierarchical order; when these things and others start happening it's worth asking: 'How are we doing?'

MAYDAY IN EUSKADI

To avoid confrontations with the CNT-AIT those of us in the CNT-U in Bilbao went to Vitoria where we were about 200 altogether and marched at the same time as the CUIS, a Maoist-Basque union which has been involved with the CNT-U at grassroots level in various struggles. The turnout was very low all over Spain because May the 1st fell on a Friday this year so a lot of people took a long week-end. There was quite a lot of talk afterwards about the futility of symbolic marches and personally I got a lot more out of the mass picnic we had afterwards.

However, by British standards, even the march was pretty good. There was, of course, no question of forming up in files, stewards or a police escort, so it made good cover for a band of graffiti artists who were with us. The chants started off spontaneously (I even started one myself) and were a cut above the usual, eg 'Los 800 mil son guardia civil', ie the 800,000 jobs the PSOE promised have turned out to all be in the guardia civil. Another said Solchaga (the PSOE's finance minister) was a medallion man, but the most outrageous (not to be taken seriously) was 'Mata a un cura, mata dos, mata tres, me cago en dios' which is 'Kill a priest, kill two or three, I shit on god, dede dede.'

Even on a demo to mark a local general strike organised by the CCOO in April I heard a chant that would translate into the British situation as 'Kinnock, Hattersley, what a pair of bastards!'... which just shows what 6 years of a socialist government can do for people's political awareness.

For what it's worth someone who stayed in Bilbao said the CNT-AIT was about 50 people tagged on the end of the CCOO contingent. The CNT-U in Madrid celebrated Mayday on a joint demo with the CCOO where the two unions were totally mixed together - good for publicity, eg Jose March for the CNT-U up there at the front of the demo in all the newspapers - but obviously a bit worrying. More on such things in no.8 which will contain a report on the tenth congress of the CNT-U in Madrid on July 12th.

After this mailing your sub stands at.....