MUJERES LIBRES

Organizing Women During the Spanish Revolution

— Martha Ackelsberg

This article was written by an American feminist Martha Ackersberg, and was published originally in the USA.

Do you live in a town where women are relegated to a position of insignificance, dedicated exclusively to housework and the care of children? No doubt, many times you have thought about this with some disgust, and when you've noticed the freedom which your brothers, or the men of your households, enjoy, you have felt the hardship of being a woman. . . .

Well, against all this which you have had to suffer comes **Mujeres Libres**. *We want you to have the same freedom as your brothers. . . we want your voice to be heard with the same authority as your father's. We want you to attain that independent life you have wanted without worrying about what people will say.*

But, realize, that all this requires your effort; that these things don't come for nothing; and that, in order to achieve them, you need the assistance of others. You need others to be concerned with the same things as you, you need to help them, as they will help you. In a single word, you must struggle communally; which is the same as saying, you must create a Group **(Agrupacion)** *of women.*

This passage comes from a pamphlet entitled, "How to Organize a Mujeres Libres Group," written in Spain, probably in 1937.

Mujeres Libres was founded by women who were activists within the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement. Between April 1936 and February 1939 they built an organization which claimed over 27,000 members (overwhelmingly working class women), in 147 groups throughout Republican Spain. Their goal was to empower working women. They had come to believe, through their own and others' experiences in the anarcho-syndicalist movement, that women's empowerment required a separate organization, one which would address what they called "women's triple enslavement: to ignorance, to capital, and to men.".

Unlike most socialist movements, which treat economic issues (i.e., class relations) as the most basic form of subordination, on which all others depend, anarchists saw *hierarchy*, formalized authority, as the crucial problem. Within that theoretical framework, there was a place to treat various types of subordination (e.g., political and sexual as well as economic) as more or less independent relationships, each of which would need to be addressed by a truly revolutionary movement. And, as early as 1872, in fact, they set the overcoming of women's subordination as a goal of the movement.

Nevertheless, despite this openness on the theoretical level, women's oppression had never been given a high priority within the Spanish anarchist movement. Most anarchists refused to recognize the specificity of women's subordination; they assumed if they were concerned at all that women's emancipation would follow either from their incorporation into the paid labor force or (more commonly) simply from the establishment of an anarchist society. At best, they insisted that the struggle to overcome women's subordination must take place within and through movement organizations. As one woman activist stated,

> *We are engaged in the work of creating a new society, and that work must be done in unison. We should be engaged in union struggles, along with men, fighting for our places,* **demanding** *to be taken seriously.*

But the women of *Mujeres Libres* insisted that more direct action was necessary. In their view, although anarchist men may have "talked a good line" while out on the speakers' platforms, most did not change their behavior toward women on a day-to-day basis. "It's true that we have struggled together," one woman recalled saying to her male comrades, "but you are always the leaders, and we are always the followers. Whether in the streets or at home. We are little better than slaves!" *Mujeres Libres* aimed both to overcome the barriers of ignorance and inexperience which prevented women from participating as equals in the struggle for a better society, and to confront the dominance of men within the anarchist movement itself. As Soledad Estorach, an "initiator" of the Barcelona group, told me:

> *In Cataluna, at least, the dominant position was that men and women should both be involved. But the problem was that the men* **didn't know how** *to get women involved as activists. They continued (both men and most women) to think of women as assistants, accepted in a secandary status. For them, I think, the ideal situation would be to have a* **companera** *who did not oppose their ideas, but in whose private life would be more or less like other women.* **They** *wanted to be activists 24 hours a day and in that context, of course, it's impossible to have equality. . . . Men got so involved that the women were left behind, almost of necessity. Especially, for example, when he would be taken to jail. Then she would have to take care of the children, work to support the family, visit him in jail, etc. That, the* **companeras** *were very good at! But for us, that was not enough. That is not activism!*

When the women of *Mujeres Libres* talked about their aims, they used a word, *capacitacion*, that has no exact English equivalent. "Empowerment" is probably the closest we can get. For them, as for anarchists in general, changing people's consciousness of themselves and their places in society is a crucial step toward revolutionary change.

Yet the hard question, of course for *Mujeres Libres* as for any any social revolutionary movement is how does that change in consciousness take place?

Although *Mujeres Libres* was an organization of women, which had as its purpose the empowerment of women, it was firmly rooted in the Spanish anarchist movement. In order to understand its program and strategy, we must take a few moments to locate it in that larger Spanish context.

One of the defining characteristics of the "communalist-anarchist tradition" (by which I mean the tradition of Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta, on which the Spanish anarchist movement drew) is the insistence that means must be consistent with ends. If the goal of revolutionary struggle is a non-hierarchical, egalitarian society, then it must be created through the activities of a non-hierarchical movement. Otherwise, participants will never be em-

powered to act independently, and those who direct the "movement" will end up as "directors" of the post-revolutionary society.

Crucial to their ability to imagine such non-authoritarian order was their insistence that individuality and communty are not incompatible but, rather, mutually related. The social world they envision is not one of isolated individuals. Nor is it the moral and social chaos so often associated with the word "anarchism." Rather, it is a world in which orderly human relationships are central, but order is assured via cooperation, rather than through competition or hierarchy.

Spanish anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists reflected this perspective in their commitment to decentralism and to a strategy of "direct action." Direct action means that revolutionary activity and organization begin "where people are," not through "intermediaries" such as political parties. Those local activities are then coordinated either through "propaganda by the deed," exemplary action which brings adherents by the power of the positive example it sets, or by "spontaneous organization," non-coercive federations of local groups. The point here, was to achieve *order without coercion*. This Spanish anarchists accomlished through what we might call "federative networking." Under the general aegis of the movement were trade unions, affinity groups, storefront schools, cultural centers, etc. But none of these groups could claim to speak — or act — for others. They were more "forums for discussion" than directive organizations.

Finally, Spanish anarchists believed that direct action takes place only within a context of "preparation"; "spontaneous order" emerges only from processes that empower people. "Preparation" was the key to the success of a strategy of direct action. While they rejected the role of a party in laying down a blueprint for the revolution, Spanish anarchists also denied that fundamental social change could take place in a vacuum. People needed to develop confidence in themselves and in their comprehension of the world. But such preparation, if it was not to take a hierarchical form, could take place only through people's experience of new and different forms of social organization.

The anarcho-syndicalist trade union movement (CNT) had been developing for close to 70 years by the time the Civil War officially began in July, 1936. Non-hierarchically structured union organizations, growing up in both rural and urban/industrial Spain, served as arenas within which workers could develop a sense of their ability — when united with others — to take control of their work, and of their lives. And unions drew on, while also nurturing, age-old traditions of collective action. Whether in 19th-century declarations of *communismo libertario* in rural Andalusia, or in 20th-century antiwar demonstrations and "bread riots" in Barcelona, thousands of men and women throughout Spain had had experiences of direct action. They had taken to the streets to demand that their needs be met and, more to the point, had sometimes used their power directly, as in "liberating" meat markets and stores of coal.

Rationalist schools and *ateneos* provided yet other contexts for "preparation." These schools, which grew up in many working-class *barrios* in Barcelona during the early 1930s, were supported by local unions, and staffed by a few dedicated teachers who had managed to get some training in an educational system otherwise totally dominated by the Church. They were models of participatory education, non-hierarchically organized, which attacked illiteracy and built self-confidence and class consciousness at the same time. The cultural centers which usually operated out of the same building provided much-needed recreational opportunities but always with a message. Trips to the mountains or the seashore, for example, were always accompanied by *charlas*. As one woman said of her experiences with the group, "ideas got stirred up, they created a sense of being *companeros* and *companeras* .... That's where we were formed, most deeply, ideologically." Most *ateneos* had libraries as well which opened the doors for many young people who had no other access to books: "When I saw the library at the *ateneo*, I thought all the world's knowledge was at my fingertips."

Thus, by the time of the Civil War there was already an extensive network of anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist organizations and activities, especially in Catalonia, Aragon and the Levant. What is less well-known is that the Spanish Civil War was not simply a war of "democ racy" against "fascism." Within the territory "controlled" by forces loyal to the Republic, a social revolution took place. Somewhere between 7 and 8 million people are estimated to have taken part in collectivizations of rural or industrial properties. The anarchists were among the groups most central to these efforts. *Mujeres Libres* was to operate in that larger revolutionary context — its 147 local groups were clustered in areas that were also major centers of the anarcho-syndicalist movement (in Madrid, Cataluna, the Levant and Aragon).

Of the various "preparatory" activities I described, the schools and cultural centers, in partciular, were especially important to women. Spanish society at the time was extremely sex-divided. Most men and women kept to a society almost exclusively of their own sex. Beyond that, the subordination of women — both economic and cultural — was much more severe than that of men. Rates of illiteracy were higher among women than among men. Those women who did work for wages outside the home (predominantly unmarried women), were relegated to the lowest-paid jobs in the most oppressive work conditions. But these educational centers and organizations were sex-integrated, and they provided young women as well as young men an opportunity to enrich themselves culturally and to meet people of the opposite sex as equals. Finally, they could speak to the needs and experiences of women — and of unorganized workers — as unions could not, since they operated in an arena much broader than that of the workplace. Not surprisingly, virtually all the women with whom I spoke reported that their experiences in the *ateneos* and youth organizations were essential to their own development, and a critical component of their "preparation" for *Mujeres Libres*. Some women, then, did find a place for themselves within the community provided by the anarcho-syndicalist movement and, in particular, by its youth organizations. But many

also recognized the limitations of those groups.

On the one hand, as women, they were not always treated with the seriousness, respect and equality they felt they (and all women) deserved. And, on the other hand (and I think this weighed even more heavily for many of the founders, since they were so committed to the anarchist movement and its project), they were all too aware of the inability of the anarcho-syndicalist movement to attract many competent women to its ranks, let alone to move them into positions of leadership. They attributed that failing both to the sexism of the men and to the "lack of preparation" of sufficient numbers of women.

I want to give you a very brief introduction to a few of those women. They captivated me completely when I met and interviewed them in Spain and France a few years ago. Some sense of who they were and how they lived their lives may also help to put what follows into perspective.

Many of the activists were young (although, of course, those who were young in 1935-36 are most likely to be alive now to tell their stories!) and unmarried. While many of them (as most working-glass girls) had begun work somewhere between the ages of eight and 12, their unmarried (and, more significantly, perhaps, childless) status allowed them a certain amount of time to engage in movement-related activities. Some of the women who were to be active in *Mujeres Libres* came from longstanding anarchist families, and talked about absorbing "the ideas" almost with their mothers' milk.

Enriqueta Rovira, for example, is one of seven children of a dedicated anarchist couple, and the granddaughter of Abelardo Saavedra, one of the early anarchist travelling teachers who had been forced to leave the country at the turn of the century for having committed the crime of teaching field hands in Andalucia (rural southern Spain) how to read. She cannot even describe how she "became" an anarchist — the ideas were there from the beginning. "These ideas came to us without any imposition . . . . It's almost as if she [our mother] didn't *teach* them, we *lived* them, were born with them. We learned them as you would learn to sew, or to eat." Even for Enriqueta — who came from a family which not only shared, but had nurtured, her beliefs — the association with others in an *ateneo* was crucial. It provided her with a strong sense of community which lasted over time: friendships she established there provided entree for her to do important work during the years of the Civil War.

Others came from families which had leftist (or at least republican) leanings, but which did not define themselves as "anarchist." Sara Guillen, for example, was about 16 when the war broke out, and had had little to do with the movement before then. She became acquainted with the CNT through attending union meetings with her father, and became involved with Mujeres Libres — despite feeling, initially, that it was wrong, to have a separate organization for women — when she found herself defending the women's right to meet against the taunts and jeers of her male peers.

Soledad Estorach's father — a teacher, and a republican — had

Hostensia Torres and Dolores Prat speak about Mujeres Libres in the video film ***De Toda La Vida/...All Our Lives.***

imbued her with a love of learning (and taught her to read — no small feat for a young woman in those years) before he died when she was ten. By age 14 she left home — to avoid a marriage that would have "confined me to inside the four walls of a house." She went to Barcelona to find work which would enable her to support herself and her mother and sister. There she eventually joined a union, and became involved in an *ateneo* which, as she reported, opened a whole new world to her: "It was an incredible life, the life of a young militant. A life dedicated to struggle, to knowledge, to remaking society. It was characterized by a kind of effervescence, a constant activity."

Still others came from families which seemed to have no connection with these "ideas." Pepita Carpena, for example, learned about the CNT from underground anarchist organizers who came to "proselytize" at the dances she attended as a teenager. In response to her father's reluctance to allow her to attend meetings at night, she told him, "I am only doing what you should have been doing in my place: fighting for the emancipation of the workers!" and invited him to join her at a meeting. Convinced by the dedication she saw among the people at the meeting, he never bothered her again.

What all of these women had in common was that all of them had been involved either in union activities or, more commonly, in ateneos or youth organizations. These experiences energized them with the vision of a new way to live and to interact with others. The networks created there provided important ongoing support which was both emotional and material: many women made life-long friends whose mutual support was essential during those times when (in the