

José Peirats

WHY I WAS EXPELLED FROM THE CNT

Dear Comrades

Some time back you asked me to clarify the reasons why I was expelled from the Spanish CNT in exile: I promised to do so, but let time slip by. Now, since you have recently pressed the matter again, I have finally made up my mind.

Every time I picked up a pen I used to wonder: are the comrades going to understand the parasitical complexities that have grown up around a relatively straightforward event? Are the Spanish comrades themselves not bewildered by and lost in such complexities, many of which are artificially contrived? Another factor that made me hesitate is that implicit in any explanation from me would be a denunciation that, as is only natural, might have sparked a controversy with those called into question. Not that I shy away from polemic (in which I am well versed), so much as I am convinced that I was in the right; but I am equally sure that, in the eyes of the public, I would not come away as the loser. My antagonists can call upon a whole battery of newspapers, bulletins, forums, meetings, circulars, etc., whereas I have nothing. But what does it matter if one loses in front of the gallery? I have lost so many times! What counts is that one should come away with a clear conscience. And it is for that very reason that I have made up my mind to fill you in.

The first thing I want to clear up is that it was I who resigned from the CNT: my expulsion came later. Therefore, I am splitting this explanation into two parts: 1) My voluntary resignation from the CNT and 2) My expulsion.

WHY DID I RESIGN FROM THE CNT?

I had been a member from the age of 14 and, albeit that from inside I have been through some difficult moments that hit me hard, the thought of distancing myself from it never crossed my mind. If I have done so, on account of a number of shameful things and the odd scoundrelly individual, I nonetheless think of myself as being connected more than ever with the CNT, whose ideas I have never stopped championing and serving to the best of my ability. Likewise, I have never, wherever and however I could (through my articles and lampoons) been slow to attack behaviours that I regard as bringing it into disrepute. I know that some comrades for whom I have the highest regard have taken me to task for that: whether ill-informed or jaundiced by the official propaganda, they have not seen and not been willing to look beyond any aggressiveness on my part. They have refused to look past the aggressiveness of one man vis à vis massive attacks directed not just at him but also at the libertarian ethic and the legacy bequeathed to us by our predecessors. Those comrades have refused to see the assault upon the principles of our organization within Spain and in exile, an assault that brought us – organizationally speaking – to the brink of a collapse where we are not even close to the range of new forces currently deploying inside Spain against the overall crisis of the power of the dictatorship in that country.

Now to brass tacks. The CNT in exile suffered a radical split in 1946: that split had left it incapable of playing any significant part in the aftermath of the defeat of fascism across Europe. It had been triggered by the fact that comrades influential within the domestic underground organization inside Spain had decided to join the republican government set up in France in 1946. The vast majority of our membership in exile opposed that hapless decision. Our argument was that the

“circumstantialist” phase that had prompted anarchists to participate at ministerial level was well and truly over. In spite of our objections, there were now two CNT ministers in the republican government-in-exile, ministers nominated by the National Committee of the Interior within Spain. This serious circumstance blew asunder CNT unity inside and outside the country: from that point on, there were two CNTs of Spain at loggerheads with each other and stymying each other, to the utter enchantment of their common foe.

Now, from 1948 onwards, the supporters of collaboration started to realize that the government approach had failed to work the wonders in which they had implicitly believed. Even the socialists were shunning the government-in-exile. Their heterodox CNT ended up pulling out its ministers and began to indicate an appetite for reconciliation. The problem was not a complicated one: whilst collaboration within government had been the trigger for a falling-out, once that had been ended, reunification of the CNT might have become feasible. With just one CNT, it would have recovered its strength and our fight against the dictatorship would have become more impactful. But that was wishful thinking. The resentments generated by violent polemics, plus a substantial dose of sectarianism (prioritized over the crucial issue of the dictatorship) meant that that precious opportunity went to waste as did all the others that presented themselves after that. It should be stressed that back then we could still rely upon young, capable militants, who were, however, beginning to age and assimilate, peaceably, in the Americas as well as within Spain.

The split lingered into the 1960s, at which point those from within the orthodox tendency or sector who, as we did, favoured a reconciliation (assuming that our norms and principles could be respected) brought about a reunification of the CNT after an enormous effort. Additional fuel was added to the fire by a number of individuals whose bureaucratic interests were being called into question. And what were such people afraid of? Loss of their poorly paid positions? Losing their hold over the higher committees? Among the poisonous legacy from the civil war period, in addition to the collaboration with government, were salaried posts, of which the CNT had had scarcely any prior to the civil war. Were such comrades afraid of the competition from fresh blood such as reunification might have led to? Let it be said that the heterodox sector, in order to rejoin the fold, had had to agree to all of our conditions and materially defer to our organizational models which were still up and running. Their own organization had had to be dismantled, with all its chattels and archives handed over and its members becoming mere foot-soldiers. In military parlance, the reunification had amounted to unconditional surrender by the heterodoxes.

Were greater assurances asked for? Well, no. Exploiting an issue about which the grassroots membership was highly sensitive, slander campaigns were then unleashed, to raise the bogeyman of reformism: a lot of comrades who had worked on behalf of unity, comrades of proven ideological integrity, found themselves tagged as “politicals”. Such accusations were unproven and were not even voiced openly: these were craven insinuations, peddled in the knowledge that, no matter what, they would have an impact.

By 1965 things had become so tense that now we, who were trying to defend unity against a sort of chauvinism, plus those comrades who had “surrendered” to us, now became the targets for all these broadsides.

Given this climate of mutual distrust, relations were poisoned. One of the most serious issues had to do with the conspiratorial side of things. Serious irregularities in the handiwork of the CNT’s general

secretariat were flagged up. In turn, the latter directed further accusations against their own accusers. The Libertarian Youth, some of the members of which featured as either accused or accusers, got involved in the controversy. The matter was to have come up for discussion at the forthcoming congress; feelings were running high.

There was another issue and it was this: the very first congress in exile had been held in 1945. As the members of the former Libertarian Movement General Council were scattered to the four winds and since its most recent secretary had not delivered a report on its stewardship, a special panel was appointed to look into all of the material assets that it was assumed the General Council had been in possession of back in 1939. The last general secretary of the Council had been elected as CNT general secretary at that very same 1945 congress.[1] However, far from this making the task of the commission of inquiry easier, he proceeded instead to wind things up, not – as would have been normal practice – at a further congress, but rather at a mere gathering of regional secretaries. At that gathering, it was decreed that the individual concerned should have to deliver the Council's stewardship report only after our return to Spain.

At a congress held in 1963, and following a fierce struggle, it was agreed that a fresh commission of inquiry be appointed to look into the stewardship of the Council. That Commission was to have presented its findings to the 1965 congress.

These were the main issues with which that congress was to have had to deal. On the day when the proceedings finally got under way, a host of irregularities were detected. The commission of inquiry into the Council's stewardship had not been summoned. There was to have been a congress called in 1964, but, in contravention of normal practice, it was cancelled. Moreover, at the 1965 congress a number of delegations were present whose bona fides was open to question, as was promptly demonstrated.

The handling of the proceedings was as emotive as the seriousness of the matters due to be dealt with promised to be. In particular, there was a squabble that pitted the general secretary against the Libertarian Youth, in their capacity as members of the conspiratorial commission. Serious accusations were regularly being traded back and forth. Those making accusations against the general secretary were in turn targeted by violent and defamatory charges levelled by a questionable "majority" mobilized around a watchword to the effect that at this congress the CNT's principles, under threat from a coalition of enemies who had infiltrated our ranks under cover of the reunification, were in need of rescue.

Having come to appreciate that there was a drive to bring down the guillotine on certain heads, I spoke up several times to move that no resolution be passed at the end of the proceedings, that everyone be left free to come to his own conclusions and that we move on to the next item in the order of business. That, and other interventions of the same sort, were construed as if we, seeing that we had lost our case, were trying to wriggle out of any sanctions. Those who were defending the secretary then stepped up their attack: no matter what the cost, they were determined to see a few heads roll.

The battle peaked when, after the debates had been guillotined, the chair of the congress called for a *viva voce* vote, which is to say, a vote shouted out loud. Immediately, as if on a signal, a "YES" rang out like a shot from a cannon. Those with the greatest number of voices shouted loudest and the ones asking for a vote based on the number of members actually represented by each delegate,

shouted without much conviction, or abstained. In any event, it was completely impossible to establish who were the winners and who the losers. But the chair for that session solemnly announced what was incontrovertibly a pre-ordained verdict: the opposition was condemned. Protests followed and there was lobbying for voting to be based on actual membership figures, that being the voting system in force. An appeal was made to the general secretary in attendance, he being the custodian of the organization's accords and rules. With a sardonic smile, his response was: "Congress is sovereign ..."

About twenty delegates walked out of the congress. I confined myself to stating: "I am not walking out of this congress: I am resigning from the CNT." And I had grounds aplenty: it was a decision that I had been mulling over frequently ever since I had reached the conclusion that Machiavellianism had ensconced itself in the CNT's decision-making bodies. Those of us who were out to rebuild unity, were just poor utopians. We had thought that, by virtue of our coherent reasoning and unblemished morality, we might be able to restore unity. Having been a lifelong *piel rojo* (redskin), a leftwing extremist, held in high regard for my honesty even by right-wing extremists, I naively thought that I was above all suspicion. Just as rashly, I thought I might with impunity vouch for the comrades who had surrendered with bag and baggage. It was only then that it came to me that the latter were being looked upon as prisoners of war. At that 1965 congress, I came in for harsh criticism even from comrades I looked up to and with whom I had been in jail. That so sickened me that I resumed my seat with tears in my eyes: as those tears fell, the illusions that in 1947 had brought me back from the Americas to France to work on behalf of our beliefs were dashed: and the fervour that on two occasions, in 1947 and in 1948, had prompted me to re-enter Spain by clandestine means (whilst holding the position of general secretary on the second occasion) evaporated. I realized that the final battle for the CNT had been lost, whilst the enemy was being left unmolested: any more would have been the equivalent of Penelope's weaving and unweaving of her tapestry. It was curtains. As far as I was concerned, the farce was over.

MY EXPULSION FROM THE CNT

This is a very short story. After resigning from the CNT, I had retained possession of the documentation assembled by the commission of inquiry into the moral and economic stewardship of the MLE Council; that commission had been appointed at the 1963 congress and I was its secretary. I was called before a disciplinary board and asked to hand over that documentation: I refused. I kept my appointment at the CNT's headquarters and, in order to prevent anyone's making off with or adding anything to my statement, I had merely read out a lengthy manuscript, a copy of which I then handed to the disciplinary board: along with a long list of anecdotal remarks querying Germinal Esgleas's performance as secretary of both the CNT and the General Council during the period in question and closing with my refusal to hand over the documentation it was asking for, in that I had good grounds for believing that it would end up in the hands of the individual being called into question. (My precise words were: "I have no intention of handing this inquiry over to the person being inquired into.") He had always hindered the truth being made known about the MLE Council's moral and economic stewardship. I also stressed that the 1965 congress had not issued any formal invitation to the commission of inquiry of which I was the chair.

In the summer of 1969, the official CNT held an Inter-Continental Plenum in Bordeaux. Let it be said that after 1965, no further congresses had been held and none has been held to this very day. At that Plenum, proceedings were mounted against various opposition comrades to whom imaginary

offences had been ascribed, by way of justification for the verdict. The accused were all subjected to the maximum penalty: expulsion.

By this time, the reader may well be thinking of something akin to a bourgeois court, with judges, prosecution counsel, witnesses, barristers, codes and public hearings. There was none of that: there were only judges and accusers, taking turns in each role. The accused were not even summoned and therefore could not offer any defence: since there was no appeal against the verdict, the inquisitors never even bothered to formally apprise the convicted persons of their verdict. The verdict was as harsh as one might expect, as was the punishment imposed on those individuals or groups who might speak up in defence of the condemned on the basis that the penalty was unfair.

As far as I personally was concerned, judgment was passed on my case too: and, I being no better than any of the others, I too was not summoned to appear. As you will recall, though, I had delivered a juicy defence into the hands of the panel acting as prosecuting counsel. Somebody brought that up and the response was that no consideration could be given to it, in that it amounted to an intolerable attack upon the institutions. The queryist declared himself satisfied with that and nobody felt compelled to arrive at his own assessment of my submission. And so I was expelled, four years after I had walked away. They were displeased with me and so they decided to burn me in effigy.

Fraternal greetings,

José Peirats

France, 27 December 1972

Note

1, A reference to Germinal Esgleas.

Taken from the document in Italian found at: <https://centrostudilibertari.it/it/turroni-peirats>

on the website of the Centro Studi Libertari Archivio G. Pinelli

Further Information

José Peirats, in the wake of his resignation from the CNT, wrote to his friend Antonia Fontanillas:

"I just know you're going to come back with something like the Congress was only a part of the CNT and that *el Fraile* [The Monk i.e. Esgleas] was able to manipulate it. Do not kid yourself. Regrettably, the Congress is a very fair reflection of the lifeblood of the CNT. I know that there are minorities that are not to be overlooked. But this is what the majority is all about (...) comrades who let themselves be easily bamboozled and scream loudly about the need to uproot the "weeds", meaning us [...] They have won and I am sportingly packing it in. My more than fifteen-year long campaign against rabble-rousing and riding roughshod over our organizational norms has achieved nothing. Meetings, plenums, resolutions, norms ... everything has been deformed by this mythomania about there being a need for some supernatural power looking out for the purity of principles."

Cited in Irene Lozano: *Federica Montseny: Una anarquista en el poder* (Planeta DeAgostini, Barcelona, 2007) pp. 367-368.

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