

"Durruti must leave for Madrid without delay"

A revealing document located among the records of the Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores (CNT) at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam clarifies why Buenaventura Durruti (Léon, 14 July 1896 – Madrid, 20 November 1936) agreed to move to Madrid in November 1936.

During that autumn, Durruti was unshakable in his fight against fascism and stayed aloof from the reformist decisions taken by the CNT during the first months of the Spanish Civil War. He did what he could to carry out his planned offensive against Zaragoza. To his mind, taking the city in Aragón was an essential step to the coming establishment of libertarian communism.

In October 1936, he had received a negative answer to his request for arms from Francisco Largo Caballero (Madrid 1869 – Paris 1946), a socialist heading the government. Durruti then travelled to Madrid in order to seize the gold reserves of the Bank of Spain, an action that was in the end cancelled by his compañeros of the CNT. To his great regret he was unable to get the means to enter Zaragoza.

In the meantime, the Stalinists took up positions in Madrid and the CNT moved ever farther away from the revolutionary path taken in July, accepting the militarization of the popular militias with a view to obtain a seat in the government.

Those were tragic weeks for Madrid. The bombs kept falling on the city that continued to resist while the government moved to Valencia – a flight that was greeted in the streets by antifascists with cries of *Long live Madrid without government!* Command in the city fell to José Miaja (Oviedo 1878 – México 1958) and a defence council dominated by the communists. It was then that everybody thought of Durruti.

We know that the CNT was partly responsible for Durruti's transfer to Madrid. In his book *The Brief Summer of Anarchy*, Hans Magnus Enzensberger collected the testimony of Federica Montseny (Madrid 1905 – Toulouse 1994) who claimed to be the brains behind the move while accusing the National Committee of appropriating the idea¹.

The document found among the CNT records, however, shows that responsibility for the decision rests not with the National Committee, but with the Regional Committees of the CNT and the FAI (the Federación Anarquista Ibérica). Dated from November 9, during the Regional Plenum of Local and County Sections that took place in Barcelona, the two Committees pointed out the benefits the operation would bring to "the Organization". They ended the letter with the following mandate: "Compañero Durruti must leave for Madrid without delay".²

¹ Enzensberger, H.M., *El corto verano de la anarquía: vida y muerte de Durruti*, Barcelona: Anagrama, 2002 (see pp. 220-221)

² Letter to Durruti, 9 November 1936, Archivo CNT: 39C.2. IISH

Abandoning the push for Zaragoza was no doubt beneficial to the various forces that had emerged among the antifascists. As the historian Miguel Amoros has explained, the Russians avoided an anarchist front in Zaragoza and the CNT not only secured its participation in the government, but also slowed down Stalinism in a capital that was waiting for the International Brigades invited by Largo Caballero³.

Durruti ended up in Madrid without the forces needed to confront the gruesome fascist offensive in the Ciudad Universitaria. Fatigue, casualties, many wounded and a lack of relief troops – such was the reality at the front until that sad day of November 19. Incredibly, the anarchist Buenaventura Durruti was hit by an enemy bullet in broad daylight before the impassive eyes of his four companions. He died the following day at the Hotel Ritz.

The news exploded like a bomb and the CNT tried everything to silence it. To put an end to the rumours that were circulating they later said it was a fascist bullet. No, a communist bullet. No, it was the anarchists themselves. The real cause remains unknown until today.

His funeral procession passed through the heart of Barcelona and there was no lack of tributes and speeches in his honour. Yet behind the political spectacle that mourned the death of an anarchist transformed into a hero, there was a different reality. The front against Stalinism had disappeared, and State anarchism as promoted by the official part of the CNT found its way cleared.

Then came May 1937. On the third day of that month, Eusebio Rodríguez Salas, in charge of public security in Barcelona, on the orders of the Generalitat attacked the Telefónica building that had been in the hands of the CNT since July 1936. This triggered a week of violent battles, in which a majority of anarchists and Trotskyists of the POUM confronted the other republican forces endorsed by the Generalitat.

Federica Montseny joined other political leaders in a call for peace on the Generalitat's radio station. The CNT ordered the workers to resume work. It also denounced a leaflet published by a group named "The Friends of Durruti", whom they called *incontrolados*⁴. The Friends proceeded all the same. They soon wrote and distributed a manifesto that analysed what had happened during the preceding days and accused the CNT of treason⁵.

The May Days marked the irreversible end of the revolutionary experience. The prisons were filled with antifascists and the rupture between the top of the CNT and its base became unsustainable. Indeed, it happened that the leaders of the organization were abused and jeered at by the workers.

Those humiliations might explain the absence of Federica Montseny at the meeting held in Madrid in November 1937 on the anniversary of Durruti's death – a decision she took without

³ See: Amoros, M., *Durruti en el laberinto*, Bilbao: Murreko burutazioak, 2006

⁴ 'La CNT y la FAI desautorizan una octavilla de la entidad "Los Amigos de Durruti"', *Solidaridad Obrera*, 6 May 1937

⁵ See: Guillamón, A., *Los amigos de Durruti: historia y antología de textos*, Barcelona: Aldarull y Dskntrl-ed, 2013

warning. It caused strains in the Centro Regional Committee, as we can see from a letter written the next day by its secretary, David Antona (1904-1945), to Mariano Vázquez, the secretary of the National Committee⁶.

It's hard to imagine what happened during those days and many questions still remain unanswered. Fortunately, we have the historical records that continue to throw new light. The letter we considered here slept in the CNT archive for 82 years. Today it is a key to understanding why Buenaventura Durruti very reluctantly chose to march to the defence of Madrid in November 1936.

Almudena Rubio Pérez

⁶ Letter by David Antona to Mariano Vázquez, 22 November 1937, Archivo CNT: 49B.6. IISH