

Sisters in Arms:

Women in the Spanish Revolution



A Collection of Essays from the
Websites of International Anarchism



Zabalaza Books

"Knowledge is the Key to be Free"

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Fists upraised, women of Iberia
towards horizons pregnant with light
on paths afire
feet on the ground
face to the blue sky.
Affirming the promise of life
we defy tradition
we mold the warm clay
of a new world born of pain.
Let the past vanish into nothingness!
What do we care for yesterday!
We want to write anew
the word WOMAN.
Fists upraised, women of the world
towards horizons pregnant with light
on paths afire
onward, onward
toward the light.

Mujeres Libres' Anthem
Lucia Sanchez Saornil
Valencia 1937

**This pamphlet is made up of texts downloaded from
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www.struggle.ws

**They have been edited slightly by the *Zabalaza*
Books editor**

★ **Propaganda**

Consciousness raising and support for these activities was spread by means of literature, including booklets, the "Mujeres Libres" journal, exhibitions, posters, and cross-country tours, especially to rural areas. There are many accounts of urban companeras visiting rural collectives and exchanging ideas, information, etc. (and vice versa). Produced entirely by and for women, the paper *Mujeres Libres* grew to national circulation and, by all accounts, was popular with both rural and urban working class women. Each issue encouraged its readers to develop a libertarian vision, and to participate fully in the events around them; the paper consistently spelled out the "revolution and war" position of the movement.

★ **Nationalist Repression**

The nationalists were well aware of the opposition they faced from women. General Quiapo de Llano, in his radio broadcasts from Seville, raved against and threatened the "wives of anarchists and communists". As they consolidated their power, the Fascists wasted no time in reversing the liberalisation of divorce and introducing strict dress codes for women - including the banning of bare legs! The Repression, of course, was much more terrible, with up to a third of Spain's population ending up behind bars, and countless men, women, and children massacred in fascist reprisals. In 1945, there were still eight jails for women political prisoners in Madrid alone. A Falange newspaper reports a baptism ceremony in Madrid in 1940 for 280 children born in prison. Many Spanish women fled to the French refugee camps, where they pooled food and established communal kitchens. Others joined the Resistance.

In their struggle against fascism and for a radical political and social alternative the "Free Women" of Spain provide an example that is still relevant today: "To be an anti-fascist is too little; one is an anti-fascist because one is already something else. We have an affirmation to set up against this negation... the rational organisation of life on the basis of work, equality, and social justice. If it weren't for this, anti-fascism would be, for us, a meaningless word."

"When the Republic came, many people went to storm the prisons, to free the prisoners, and I went too. There was some guy there shouting "down with the civil guard", "down with politics" all sorts of things. And I thought "ahah, here is an anarchist" This was my first encounter with an anarchist- and he did not look like he was a terrible person. He had a good face."

Soledad Estorach

People would say to us "Were you children baptised?" and we would say to them, "We weren't baptised". "How terrible, what girls! Such beautiful children, because we were six handsome children (I mean from the standpoint of health) and one brother - "being brought up without God, you are like dogs"

And we would say, "No you are the ones who are like dogs, that you need a master"

**Text for the website supplied by
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running day and night classes for all age groups, also encouraging women who studied to take their new skills with them to hospitals, battlefronts, and other areas and pass these on to others. Members also set up libertarian schools and universities in buildings requisitioned from or abandoned by the Church and bourgeoisie.

★ ***Family & Healthcare***

Responsibility for nursing, healthcare, and child education had traditionally been held by the Church. Mujeres Libres were committed to bringing these back into community control, developing libertarian practices, and distributing information about contraception, pregnancy, child development, and parenting through their journals and a range of pamphlets. Their attempts to meet health care needs and educate women for motherhood went beyond the written word. Within the first days of the revolution, Terrassa activists set up a nurses' school and an emergency medical clinic to treat those injured in the fighting, later creating Terrassa's first maternity clinic. Barcelona MLs ran a lying-in hospital with birth and postnatal care for women and babies, and its own health education programmes.

★ ***Sexual Equality***

Spanish anarchists - both men and women - had promoted sexual liberation for many years prior to the revolution. Now they were active in distributing information on sex and sexuality, contraception, sexual freedom, and the replacement of legal and religious marriages with "free love" - voluntary relationships that could be terminated at will by either partner. Legal marriage ceremonies continued on many collectives, because people enjoyed it as a festive occasion. Comrades went through the procedures, later destroying the documentary proof as part of the celebration! The revolution enabled thousands to experience some degree of liberation in their personal relationships. Women felt able to refuse offers of marriage without causing offence to male friends or their families. It was a time of openness and experimentation. The double standard, of course, did not disappear, let alone vanish overnight. Many men used "free love" as a license to extend their sexual conquests, while more puritanical elements labelled women who openly enjoyed their sex lives with several partners as "mujeres liebres" (rabbits)!

Modern feminist criticism of Spanish women's "lack" of achievement in these areas ignores both the traditional stranglehold of the Church and the fact that people were effectively running their communities and fighting a war on several fronts. The women involved felt justly proud that they were in charge of supplying food and clothing to barricades and battlefields, and caring for the sick and wounded. "Traditional" as these roles were, they were vital to the continuation of the war and revolution.

The People Armed:

Women in the Spanish Revolution

Free Women of Spain

***This essay is from Workers Solidarity No 57
published in May 1999***

Conditions for the vast majority of people in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s were appalling. For women they were especially bad. There were extreme gender divisions. Most women were economically dependent on men. Household chores and childcare were exclusively women's domain. In both countryside and city women's wages were lower than men's. For example the average daily wage of a male agricultural labourer was 3 pesetas while a woman got just half this, for working from dawn to dusk.

Men and women led completely separate lives. "Most women's social circles consisted of other women: family members, neighbours, fellow workers, or those they met at the market place. Men, conversely, tended to operate in a largely male world, whether in the factory, at union meetings, or in local bars." (1)

Women's personal freedom was severely restricted. Single women could not go out without a chaperone and they could often be "given away" in arranged marriages.

Due to the traditional role of women in Spain and the small number of them working outside the home, only a minority of women were involved in unions or other political organisations. Although the CNT (2) had a clearly defined egalitarian position (3), in practice the CNT failed to attract large numbers of women to its ranks and there was little discussion of women's issues.

In response to the pressing need to address women's situation, in the two years before the 1936 revolution, two groups of anarchist women in Barcelona and Madrid had begun organising. In preparation for the revolution, they built up a network of women activists which would soon merge to form the Mujeres Libres (Free Women) organisation.

★ Revolution

The military coup that took place on the 17th of July 1936 sparked off the much-awaited social revolution. Anarchist organisations had long been expecting the military revolt. In the week before the coup large numbers of CNT activists had been sleeping in their union halls in preparation for a call to arms. As soon as the coup occurred people took to the streets and stormed the armouries in search of guns which the government had refused to give them. For the first few days many women worked at building barricades and in each barrio (neighbourhood) they took care of provisions to make sure there would be enough food.

We started in that area immediately, because it was essential to get women out of the home. Eventually there were Mujeres Libres groups in almost all the factories." (Soledad Estorach)

Labour sections were organised specific to trades or industries at local, regional, and national levels, with the co-operation of the relevant CNT unions. From July 1936 onwards, women rushed to fill new factory jobs in the chemical and metallurgical industries. By September 1936 Mujeres Libres had 7 labour Sections. In Madrid and Barcelona women ran much of the public transport system. Pura Prez Arcos described her elation at being one of the first group of women licensed to drive trams in Barcelona : "They (the Transport Workers Union) took people on as apprentices, mechanics, and drivers, and really taught us what to do. If you could only have seen the faces of the passengers (when women began serving as drivers), I think the companeros on transport, who were so kind and co-operative towards us, really got a kick out of that". In the Aragon collectives the first delegates to the village committees were women. Here women were running the villages on a day-to-day basis anyway, since the village men were often away tending the flocks (no change there then!).

The secciones also set up childcare facilities at workplaces, arguing that the responsibility for children belonged to the community as a whole. They encouraged this as a widespread practice and produced booklets explaining how to set these up in other areas.

In Catalonia union organisations collectivised virtually all production, drawing on a long history of workers' organisation and struggle. Industries and workplaces were reorganised to reflect the needs of the people who worked in them. Recreation centres for workers and their families were built by timber and construction workers ; churches were requisitioned to provide day-care centres and schools for children. The mostly female textile industries were collectivised, abolishing piecework, while the CNT was active in organising homeworkers, bringing them back into the factories to receive a daily wage.

★ Education

However, years of tradition and inexperience of workplace or political activism would not disappear overnight. Mujeres Libres saw one of its major tasks as developing women's confidence and skills to speak at meetings, take full part in discussions and debates in village committees, factories, etc., and put themselves forward as delegates.

Programmes developed and implemented included basic literacy and numeracy, mechanics, business, sewing, agriculture, childcare, health, typing, languages, history, union organisation, general culture, and economics. Mujeres Libres set up farm schools for women who had left rural areas to enter domestic service in the cities, to enable them, if they wanted to, to return to their villages and participate in collectivised farming. They operated on both a city-wide basis, and in individual districts,

women were finding themselves always in a minority and without the full equality and respect that they demanded from their (male) comrades.

In late 1934 a group of Barcelona women met to overcome these problems and encourage greater activism among existing CNT women: "What would happen is that women would come once, maybe even join. But they would never be seen again. So many companeras came to the conclusion that it might be a good idea to start a separate group for these women... we got concerned about all the women we were losing... In 1935, we sent out a call to all women in the libertarian movement." (Soledad Estorach). They organised guarderías volantes (flying day-care centres), offering childcare to women wanting to serve as union delegates and attend evening meetings.

Meanwhile, Madrid women, calling themselves Mujeres Libres, were trying to develop women's social consciences, skills, and creative abilities. Towards the end of 1936, the two groups merged as Agrupación Mujeres Libres. The initiative was met with enthusiasm but there was also scepticism. Was this a "separatist" group? Would they encourage women to see liberation in terms of access to education and professional jobs, like middle-class Spanish "feminists"? Far from it. "The intention that underlay our activities was much broader: to serve a doctrine, not a party, to empower women to make of themselves individuals capable of contributing to the structuring of the future society, individuals who have learned to be self-determining, not to follow blindly the dictates of any organisation". (Federación Nacional (M.L.) Barcelona 1938)

Responding to some middle class American feminists' attempts to claim Mujeres Libres as their political ancestors, or to criticise them for failing to achieve "sexual equality", Suceso Portales, (a CNT and FIJL activist who joined Mujeres Libres in central Spain in 1936), states their position: "We are not - and we were not then - feminists. We were not fighting against men. We did not want to substitute a feminist hierarchy for a masculine one. It's necessary to work, struggle together because if we don't, we'll never have a social revolution. But we needed our own organisation to struggle for ourselves."

These were women who had as their goal a complete social and political revolution. Their means of achieving this was to ensure that women were included and preparing to be included at every step. By July 1936, a network of anarchist women activists had been established for some time, ready and able to participate in the July events, and encourage other women to take part in creating the new society.

★ **Secciones de Trabajo**

Mujeres Libres ran training programmes for new workers in co-operation with the local unions. Their Secciones de Trabajo developed apprenticeship programmes, bringing women into traditionally male factories and workplaces, improving skills and participation, and equalising pay levels to increase women's independence. "The secciones de trabajo (labour sections) were probably the most important activities.

"The most important thing women did - aside, of course, from the heroic things they did along with everyone else - was to go up to the roofs of the buildings, with paper loudspeakers, and call out to the soldiers to come to our side, to take off their uniforms and join the people." (4)

The military coup was quelled in Barcelona and other areas of Spain where anarchists had a strong influence. Immediately, workers' militias were organised and set out to wherever the frontline against fascism was. Women fought alongside men as full and equal members of the militias until November 1936 when the republican government 'militarised' the militias and ordered women away from the frontline. (5)

★ **Women in the collectives**

Immediately after the failed coup, industrial and agricultural collectives sprang up throughout the area of Spain controlled by the anti-fascists. The collectives were inspired largely by the ideas of the anarchist trade union, the CNT, and involved as many as five million people. In the first few months activists in the CNT or the FAI (6) would travel the countryside, encouraging people to collectivise. In the words of one activist, Soledad Estorach,

"When we got to a village, we'd go to the provisional committee of the village and call a general assembly of the entire village. We'd explain our paradise with great enthusiasm... And then there would be a debate - campesino style - questions, discussion, etc. By the next day, they'd begin expropriating land, setting up work groups, etc." (7)

The collectives were, in general, very successful and living conditions for those who participated improved dramatically. However in the rural collectives there was no significant change in the traditional sexual division of labour. Although single women worked outside the family home, usually in collective workshops or in branches of the distribution co-operatives, married women still held the responsibility for childcare. Domestic chores fell automatically to women.

Although some collectives (such as those of Monzón and Miramel) paid men and women equally regardless of what type of work was done, in general the work women did was undervalued. Often when wages were paid to each individual, women received less than men. Some collectives paid a family wage, however it was paid to the man who was assumed to be the head of the family.

In the cities there had traditionally been a high proportion of women working in the textile industries. Many women had done 'piece work' from home. This was abolished during the revolution and an increasing number of women flooded into the new collectivised factory jobs. For example, in Madrid and Barcelona women ran much of the public transport system. The move into factory jobs generally meant improved hours and wages for women.

However very often wage differentials continued to exist between men and women. Much like today, women had the multiple role of working outside the home and then after work coming home to take care of children and housework. This meant that for many it was difficult to attend union meetings and with such little participation in union leadership, issues of particular concern to women were often not prioritised.

This was not the case in the few areas where there had been a history of organised activity by women in their union (such as the CNT textile workers union in Terrassa). In such places women had succeeded in getting the union to adopt equal pay for equal work and paid maternity leave.

★ Mujeres libres

Many people were acutely aware of the problems that existed for women specifically, at that time. In September 1936 a women's anarchist organisation was established which, during its short two year existence, came to number 30,000 women.

Mujeres Libres had two main strategies. The first was what was called "capacitacion" which aimed at preparing women so that they could realise their full potential and participate as equals in the new society that was being built. The second strategy was "captacion" - which meant the active incorporation of women into the anarchist movement.

Mujeres Libres from the start made great efforts to involve more women in union activities. Many women had difficulties going to union meetings because of their childcare responsibilities so one of the first activities Mujeres Libres engaged in was to set up "flying day-care centres", primarily for women who were interested in serving as union delegates.

Education was an important part of the work done by Mujeres Libres. They wanted particularly to tackle the problem of illiteracy that was widespread in Spain at that time. They set up the Casa de la Dona that was taking 600 - 800 women per day by December 1938. The courses ranged from elementary reading, writing and maths to professional classes in mechanics, agriculture, and also classes in union organisation, sociology and economics.

Mujeres Libres believed that education and consciousness raising would empower women to "free her (self) from her triple enslavement: her enslavement to ignorance, her enslavement as a producer, and her enslavement as a woman. To prepare her for a new, more just social order." (8) This would enable women to take a more active role in the revolution and thus help win the war.

Mujeres Libres co-operated with unions in running numerous employment and apprenticeship programs in order to facilitate women's entry to the workplace. As well as technical training they urged trainees to fight for full equality within the workplace.

In order to spread their message Mujeres Libres had their own magazine and also published numerous articles in the libertarian press. Members of the organisa-

Clarke, described the courage of a small group of Spanish women: "I remember there was a bit of a retreat. There was a rumour went round... and they started retreating. We'd gone back a bit, and some of them were actually running. And here we came across three women who were sitting behind a machine gun just past where we were, Spanish women. I saw them looking at us. I don't know whether it shamed us or what. But these women - they sat there... We sort of stabilised the line."

They were certainly an eye-opener for foreign men! Borkenau describes a lone militia woman serving with a POUM column: "She was not from Barcelona, but a native of Galicia (who had)... followed her lover to the Front. She was very good looking but no special attention was given to her by the militia men, for all of them knew that she was bound to her lover by a link which is regarded among the revolutionaries as equal to marriage. Every single militiaman, however, was visibly proud of her for the courage she seems to have displayed in staying in an advanced position under fire with only two companions. 'Was it an unpleasant experience?' I asked. 'No, solo me da el entusiasmo' (to me it is only inspiring) replied the girl with shining eyes, and from her whole bearing I believed her. There was nothing awkward about her position among the men. One of them, who was playing an accordion, started la Cucaracha, and she immediately began the movements of the dance, the others joining in the song. When this interlude was over, she was again just a comrade amongst them."

By late December 1937 there were still women serving in the militias, but their numbers were diminishing fast. Orwell noticed that, by this time, (male) attitudes towards women had changed, citing an example of militia men having to be kept out of the way while women were doing weapons drill, because they tended to laugh at the women and put them off. However, if women were becoming less active on the front line, this was not the case elsewhere.

★ Mujeres Libres

There were a number of women's journals and groups in revolutionary Spain, including Anarchist, Socialist, and Communist organisations, which also had their own women's and youth sections. Because of the information available concerning its role, this article concentrates on the activities of the anarchist Mujeres Libres.

In the years prior to the revolution, women active in the anarcho-sindicalist movement had begun organising and meeting, preparing the groundwork for Mujeres Libres (Free Women) - a local, regional, and national network of women which grew to over 20,000 strong. It played a vital role, not only in the war against Fascism, but in building the foundations of the new libertarian society which its members hoped to create.

Anarchist women had been actively organising and promoting a women's network since 1934. Despite their involvement with and commitment to the existing networks of unions, ateneos (storefront schools / cultural centres), and youth groups,

have or already had had, first line experience in the battle against the fascist enemy. These were wonderful comrades, people who had - so far as I was concerned at least - a very, very powerful inspirational effect on arriving inside Spain itself."

Foreign women also served in the international sections of the columns. Abel Paz refers to four women "nurses" in the "International Group" of the Durruti Column. They were captured by Moors in a fierce encounter at Perdiguera. As prisoners of the fascists they were as good as dead: "Georgette, militant of the Revue Anarchiste, Gertrude, a young German woman of the POUM who liked to fight with the anarchists, and two young girls whose names haven't been recorded in the war chronicles. Durruti was very close to all of them... and he was deeply moved by these deaths. The death of Georgette, who was a sort of mascot of the Column, filled the militiamen with rage, particularly the "Sons of Night". She had carried out many surprise attacks on the enemy rearguard with the latter. They vowed to avenge her and during a number of nights made fierce attacks against the Francoists." The "Sons of the Night" were a specialised group operating behind enemy lines - women were not just at the front as nurses.

In the defence of Madrid in early November 1936, women were also prominent in the fighting. The Women's Battalion fought before Segovia Bridge. At Gestafe, in the centre of the Northern Front, women were under fire all morning and were among the last to leave. Fighting with the Italians of the International Column in Madrid was a 16 year old girl from Ciudad Real, who had joined up after her father and brother were killed. She had the same duties as the men, shared their way of life, and was said to be a crack shot.

Back in Madrid itself, women were organising in defence of the city, building barricades, providing communication services, and organising, through local committees, the distribution of food and ammunition to the barricades and throughout the city. Collective meals, crèches, and laundry facilities were set up. Women also played a major role in anti-aircraft observation and surveillance of suspected fascist sympathisers.

An International Brigade volunteer, Walter Gregory, who fought in Madrid in July 1937 recalls that: "A frequent sight in the area of Las Cibeles was of the Women's Militia coming on and off duty. In twos and threes they would make their way down the Gran Via which ultimately led to the University City and the Madrid front line. The Gran Via was too often shelled to be used by vehicles, nor would the women have risked marching down its length in formation. In small groups and chattering away to each other, they looked very like women the world over, and only their dishevelled khaki uniforms after several nights in the trenches marked them out as being something special. These brave girls were such a common sight that they did not attract comment, nor did they appear to want to. Yet Madrid remained the only place in Spain where I saw women in the front line, although it must be remembered that the first British subject killed in the war was Felicia Brown, who died on the Aragon Front as early as 25/8/1936." Felicia was caught by machine gun fire while attempting to blow up a Fascist munitions train.

During the bitter battle at Jarama in 1937, another International Brigader Tom

tion travelled the countryside on propaganda tours to talk to the women there and also to help establish rural collectives. Pepita Carpena spoke of her experiences:

"We would call the women together and explain to them... that there is a clearly defined role for women, that women should not lose their independence, but that a woman can be a mother and a companera at the same time... Young women would come over to me and say, "This is very interesting. What you're saying we've never heard before. It's something that we've felt, but we didn't know" ... The ideas that grabbed them the most? Talk about the power men exercised over women. There would be a kind of uproar when you would say to them, "We cannot permit men to think themselves superior to women, that they have a right to rule over them". I think that Spanish women were waiting anxiously for that call." (9)

It is important to take into consideration the context of 1930s Spain to fully appreciate the achievements of Mujeres Libres during the social revolution. As well as overcoming their own social conditioning they had to challenge the assumptions of what women's role should be. Many articles written in anarchist newspapers and magazines complained that often, male comrades, despite their political beliefs, would still expect to be 'masters' in their own home and had fixed views on women's proper place in society.

"All these companeros, however radical they may be in cafes, unions, and even affinity groups, seem to drop their costumes as lovers of female liberation at the doors of their homes." (10) In public contexts within the libertarian movement women generally found that they were not taken seriously and were not respected.

For these reasons Mujeres Libres always insisted on organisational autonomy. They believed that women needed a separate organisation whose main focus would be issues of particular concern to women. They argued that only through their own self-directed action would women become confident and capable, able to participate as equals in the anarchist movement.

However Mujeres Libres refused to separate the struggle for women's emancipation from class struggle. They rejected mainstream feminism whose only ambition was "to give to women of a particular class the opportunity to participate more fully in the existing system of privilege". (11) Instead, they treated women's subordination as part of a larger system of hierarchies.

Revolutions bring about dramatic social changes. Old expectations, assumptions and ways of behaving begin to be questioned. Mujeres Libres was a vital organisation for raising issues that would never have been brought forward by other left-wing organisations at the time. The social revolution was made by people, like the women in Mujeres Libres, who pushed forward for radical changes in a very conservative society.

The fate of Mujeres Libres was tied to the fate of the entire social revolution. When the republican government, including the CNT leadership, concentrated on a 'popular front' against Franco's fascists, the social revolution and the changes brought by Mujeres Libres were pushed aside. Nothing was to be done that would

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frighten the 'anti-fascist' section of the ruling class nor antagonise the 'Western democracies'. The war was not to be for a new Spain, just for parliamentary rulers rather than military ones. When this happened the revolution died, and the war against Franco was lost.

Deirdre Hogan

- (1) 'Free Women of Spain. Anarchism and the struggle for the emancipation of women', Martha A. Ackelsberg, p.43/44
- (2) CNT (Confederacion Nacional de Trabajo), an anarchist-syndicalist trade union founded in 1911.
- (3) At its Zaragoza Congress of May 1936 the CNT stated that in an anarchist society "the two sexes will be equal, both in rights and in obligations".
- (4) Soledad Estorach quoted in 'Free Women of Spain', p69
- (5) The militarisation was resisted by several columns - the Iron Column and the Durruti Column amongst others.
- (6) FAI (Federacion Anarquista Iberica) - Loose federation of anarchist groups formed in 1927.
- (7) 'Free Women of Spain', p77
- (8) Ibid, p118
- (9) Ibid, p121
- (10) Ibid, p87
- (11) Federica Montseny quoted in 'Free Women of Spain', p90/91.

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food and other supplies. Women took manufactured goods to barter with farmers in rural areas in exchange for food. Taxis and trams were repainted with revolutionary insignia as communities brought local services back under their control. "The feelings we had then were very special. It was very beautiful. There was a feeling of - how shall I say it ? - of power, not in the sense of domination, but in the sense of things being under our control, if under anyone's. Of possibility. A feeling that we could together really do something." (Enriqueta Rovira).

"We took the first steps... towards emancipation... we couldn't take the 'giant steps' because of the war and the exile, which cut our struggle short... Our children have to be the pacesetters for the future... But our memories, such beautiful memories, of that struggle so hard and so pure..."

Azucena Barba

Other commentators noted the self-assurance of Barcelona women in August 1936, previously unusual for Spanish women in public. There were also conspicuous changes in Madrid. Young working class women took to the streets in their hundreds, collecting money for the war effort, enjoying their new found liberty to walk up and down the streets, talking without inhibitions to passers by, foreigners, and militia men. This contrasts strongly with accounts of nationalist areas. For example, in Vigo, under nationalist occupation, it was unusual to even see a woman out on the streets.

★ *In the Front Line*

Despite traditional disadvantages women continued to take part in actual combat against the Fascists. Mujeres Libres supported them in Madrid by setting up a shooting range and target practice for women "disposed to defend the capital" while the Catalonia group's "War Sports" section offered: "preliminary preparation for women so that, if it should be necessary, they could intervene effectively, even on the battlefield." It was.

Armed women were always most noticeable in urban defence, when the Fascists threatened cities like Madrid. But during the first year of the war women also served as front line combatants with the militia columns, in addition to nursing and, in the usual militia system, working alongside the rural population to ensure a common food supply. Their bravery at the front cannot be over-stated because, if captured alive, they inevitably faced rape, mutilation and death. It was only after the battle of Guadalajara, in May 1937, that women were asked to leave the front, as the government demanded incorporation of the militia into regular army units.

Donald Renton, an English volunteer with the International Brigades in Figueras in November 1936 recalls the impact of seeing militia women: "While we had often talked about the role to be played by women in the general struggle, there for the first time we saw the militia women, comrades who like ourselves were either going to

use it and there were companeros without arms. So they sent me - and all the women, all families - to build barricades. We also took care of provisions. Women in each barrio (district) organised that, to make sure that there would be food for the men...Everyone did something." Women were at a disadvantage in having no experience of weapons handling. In the heat of the battle and with limited arms it was only logical that guns went to those who already knew how to use them. But in building the barricades women continued to play a vital role. A group of five or six militant women set about fortifying one of the city's most elegant buildings, "...when the (CNT) companeros returned - victorious, of course - (from storming the military barracks at Atarazanas, at the foot of the Ramblas) and saw how beautiful it was, they took it over as the casa CNT-FAI." (Soledad Estorach). Other women took to the rooftops with loudspeakers, calling on the soldiers to take off their uniforms (!) and join the people.

The Fascist uprising was crushed in Barcelona, but the workers knew that this was only the beginning. While the government urged people to stay at home rather than actively defend the city and rely upon the notorious Guardia Civil (who later used their rifle butts to disperse demonstrations of Barcelona women against rising food prices), Miguel Garcia and others were involved in efforts to organise a people's army:

"...But by this time every man and woman in Barcelona knew that we had stormed the heavens. The generals would never forgive us for what we had done. We had humiliated and defeated the Army, we - an 'unorganised, indisciplined rabble.' We had altered the course of history. If Fascism won, we knew that we would not be spared. Mothers trembled for their small children. When the news came from the South that the invading rebels were using Moorish troops to put whole towns to the sword, many of these women, even elderly ones, struggled and fought to obtain a rifle so that they could take part in the defence of their homes. Indomitable, inscrutable, they sat together in pairs, chatting among cronies, with a rifle across their lap, ready for Franco and his Moors 'and if Hitler comes, him too!'"

Garcia goes on to describe how old scores were settled as women discovered new freedoms : "In Barcelona, down in the slum quarters of the Barrio Chino, the whores were carried away by the general enthusiasm. They made short work of the ponces and pistoleros who had preyed upon them for so long. 'Away with this life, we will fight on the side of the people!' they cried. It was a great joke to the foreign journalists, who regarded the unfortunate women as less than human and anything they did ridiculous of itself.... In fact, they volunteered to fight in the front lines. Later, this proved an embarrassment. Gradually their units were disbanded...!" Some say that they inflicted more damage than enemy bullets at the front line, as companeros succumbed to a variety of interesting diseases !

While some women headed for the front with the newly formed militia columns, others were widely involved in the social revolution back home, requisitioning buildings for communal eating halls, schools, or hospitals, or collecting and distributing

Mujeres Libres

Talk given to a Workers Solidarity Movement branch meeting by Aileen in July 1995 and based on the book Free Women of Spain. It represents the authors opinion alone and may be deliberately provocative in order to start discussion

The women who founded Mujeres Libres were all active within the anarchist movement, in the anarchist union, CNT, or in the youth organisation, FIJL, however as women they were in a minority and found it difficult to incorporate more women into the activist core, either because of the sexism of the men, or because of the reluctance of the women or a combination of both. They complained that their male anarchist comrades did not treat women any differently in the home or even worse did not treat women seriously on the public arena. Girls attending Juventudes (FIJL) meetings would be laughed at even before they began speaking.

Azucena Fernandez Barba grew up with two parents deeply committed to the movement. She and her sisters and brothers helped found the ateneo Sol y Vida in Barcelona, but as she says of the anarchist men she knew;

"They struggled, they went out on strike, etc. but inside the house, worse than nothing. I think we should have set an example with our own lives, lived differently in accordance with what we said we wanted. But no. [for them], the struggle was outside. Inside the home [our desires] were purely utopian."

These attitudes reflected the variety of views on women that existed in Spain, from a Proudhonist acceptance of women's secondary status to Bakunin's insistence that women were the equal of men and should be treated as such in all social institutions.

★ How Mujeres Libres began

Two groups set up independently, one in Barcelona while one in Madrid set up the journal Mujeres Libres. The first copy appeared on May the 2nd 1936. The two groups had slightly different focus, the Barcelona group wanted to encourage greater activism on the part of women who were already members of the CNT, whereas Mujeres Libres wanted to raise consciousness among women in general.

The Barcelona group, recognising their common interests, affiliated under the name Agrupacion Mujeres Libres.

Their early work was a combination of consciousness raising and direct action. They created networks of anarchist women, in order to gain mutual support. They attended meetings with one another, checking out reports of sexist behaviour and strategising about how to deal with it.

They set up flying day-care centres in an effort to involve more women in union activities.

As Soledad said:

"When we got there, we'd do some 'propagandising'. We'd talk to them about comunismo libertario and other subjects. Poor things, they'd be at meetings, and then come home to be lectured by us! Sometimes, by then, their husbands would come home and join in the discussions"

★ What sort of articles did the journal carry?

Initially the journal did not identify itself as anarchist, although all the articles were clearly libertarian, as they were afraid of alienating women. However, after the revolution it aligned itself with the CNT. It was distributed and advertised via existing anarchist networks. Initially they were frustrated by the anarchist press ignoring it, however many anarchist men did offer to help with its distribution, and offered to contribute articles. The latter they politely refused as they felt it was important that the journal be written by women, for women.

They organised women to report on the reality of what work women were actually doing, women reported on strikes or life as an agricultural worker. Consciousness raising was important, every issue had an article about exceptional women, and they also published a column in other anarchist magazines.

A number of the pieces they carried were explicitly political commentaries: a letter from Emma Goldman describing the openness of Welsh workers to anarchist ideas, a critique of the League of Nations and the international worker's organisations [failure] to take effective action against the Italian invasion of Abyssinia and an analysis of the law as subordinating of women.

In addition the journal printed articles on cultural themes; on education, a review of Charlie Chaplin's 'Modern Times', an essay on the value of sport or an article on the life of agricultural workers.

Finally there were articles that would have been seen in any women's magazine, on the value of gas, on childcare, on fashion.

Later on, books and pamphlets supplemented the journal.

The People Armed: Women in the Spanish Revolution

**by Anti-Fascist Action from their magazine
'Fighting Talk'**

The events of 1936 - 1939 brought massive upheavals to the daily lives of Spanish people. Working class women, in particular, participated in and witnessed great changes as the old order of Church and domestic culture were swept away by social revolution and war. Thousands of ordinary women were propelled by necessity into revolutionary events, from front line fighting and organising community defence to collectivising and running farmland and factories. When the revolution was crushed in 1939, the memories and bonds formed in the revolutionary period sustained them through long years of the Fascist dictatorship, in prison, exile, or continuing the struggle in the resistance movements.

Much has been written about the war and the political organisations during this period. References to ordinary women and their activities are scarce. We have used first hand and eyewitness accounts as much as possible because these stories are best told by those who lived them.

The July Uprising

Workers, unions, and working class communities were swift to react to the Fascist's attempted coup on 17/18 July 1936. Men and women in Barcelona slept in union halls during the week before the uprising, expecting a call to arms. In Catalonia, Madrid, and Asturias, men and women, both young and old, stormed the armouries to grab the weapons that the government had refused to provide them with. Cristina Piera entered the armoury at San Andreas at dawn on the 19th with her son and his friends in the FIJL (libertarian youth organisation) and was caught up in the excitement: "I woke up in the morning and heard that people were in the armoury... so I went there ... everybody went ... I took a pistol and two ramrods (for rifles) what I could carry. They had gunpowder there too ... ven me, with the little I knew, and could do, I was there. People took arms and ammunition, and I took what I could."

Enriqueta Rovira, a young woman of 20, jumped the first train back to Barcelona when she heard the news: "Most of the action was in the centre of Barcelona. I had a pistol... and I was prepared to use it. But they soon said no... I didn't know how to

1937. By December 1938 the Casa was taking in 600 - 800 women per day. They ran numerous schools and courses to train women to enter industry in both Madrid and Barcelona. As well as technical training they urged trainees to fight for full equality within the workplace.

They also undertook military training, setting up a shooting range in Madrid. They opened maternity hospitals in Terrasa and Barcelona, and many schools for young children. These schools based themselves on the anarchist idea of education as a process of development and exploration rather than one of factual brainwashing.

They also fought for and won legalised abortion, contraception and divorce and, locally, some rights to childcare for women workers. As the war went on many members became increasingly involved in the housing and education of refugees.

This article only allows for a short summary. Above all else, Mujeres Libres stuck to their original agenda of emancipation for women through their own struggle. As the war progressed the socialists, communists and POUM (anti-Stalinist Leninists) all set up "women's sections". All wished to draw women into the struggle against fascism, and into their own organisations. None, however, took seriously the idea of women's emancipation as a goal in itself. Mujeres Libres was the only group that did so.

The fate of women in Spain was closely tied to that of the overall revolution. As this was pushed back by the Communist Party and the government of the day, so were they. As the militias and collectives were destroyed their first brief taste of freedom was snatched away. The victory of Franco only served to copper-fasten this process.

It is clear that the revolution did bring some real gains for women. It is also clear from the events of the Spanish revolution that women's freedom cannot be ignored or side-lined by revolutionaries. It cannot be left until after the revolution or to "the women's section." A struggle which does not, from the beginning, aim to win freedom and equality for all does not deserve the name revolution.

Conor McLoughlin

What did they believe in?

Mujeres Libres rejected both feminism, which they saw as a theory which fought for "equality of women within an existing system of privileges", and the relegation of women to a secondary position within the libertarian movement.

"We are not- and were not then feminists

We were not fighting against men. We did not want to substitute a feminist hierarchy for a masculine one. It's necessary to work, to struggle, together because if we don't we'll never have a social revolution. But we needed our own organisation to struggle for ourselves."

They said:

We are aware of the precedents set by both feminist organisations and by the political parties... We could not follow either of these paths. We could not separate the women's problem from the social problem. not could we deny the significance of the first by converting women into a simple instrument for any organisation, even.. our own libertarian organisation.

The intention that underlay our activities was much broader: to serve a doctrine, not a party, to empower women to make of them individuals capable of contributing to the structuring of the future society, individuals who have learned to be self-determining, not to follow blindly the dictates of any organisation."

★ What sort of work did Mujeres Libres do

Mujeres Libres had a two pronged strategy, of 'capacitacion' or preparing and 'captacion' or incorporation/participation.

They supplied food to the militia men, set up popular dining rooms. They travelled through Catalonia and Aragon helping to establish rural collectives. Many women went with representatives of the CNT and FAI with makeshift loudspeakers calling on peasants to "come over to our side". Others organised convoys of food and supplies to be sent to Madrid.

They sent up literacy programs, technically oriented classes and classes in social studies, as well as institutes (see page 119). Between 600-800 women were attending classes each day in Barcelona in December 1938. Propaganda work was carried out via radio broadcasts, travelling libraries and propaganda tours.

This is Pepita's description of her experience on propaganda trips:

"We would call the women together and explain to them... that there is a clearly defined role for women, that women should not lose their independence, but that a

women can be a mother and a companera at the same time... Young women would come over to me and say "This is very interesting. What you're saying we've never heard before. It's something that we've felt, but we didn't know"... The ideas that grabbed them the most? Talk about the power men exercised over women... There would be a kind of uproar when you would say to them, "We cannot permit men to think themselves superior to women, that they have a right to rule over them". I think that Spanish women were waiting anxiously for that call"

In co-operation with the unions they sent up apprenticeship programs.

They organised support for women soldiers and set up shooting ranges and target practice classes for women.

They set up a school for nurses and an emergency medical clinic to treat those injured in the fighting. Teresina, despite her lack of experience in the medical field was named administrator; Here she speaks with pride of her role

"I remember how many times fathers would come up to me in the clinic to request something, and I would say. "Please, here all of us are equals" And they would say to me, "Here, you really have made the revolution." I had such satisfaction from this. Because I administered the whole thing without any education... What I believed, that's what I put in practice there... and that's what I can tell you of what I did for the revolution. The rest, I did what everyone else did. But this was something I did."

In Barcelona they ran a lying-in hospital, which provided birth and postnatal care for women, as well as classes on child and maternal health, birth control and sexuality. An institute of Maternal and Childcare named after the French anarchist, Louise Michel was set up in Barcelona in February 1938.

★ **What was the reaction of the anarchist movement?**

In 1937 they travelled to Valencia and asked to get recognition and were told to go away and get organised. This provided the impetus for calling the first national conference in August 1937, during which, Mujeres Libres established a federal structure. They decided to ask if they could send observers to committees of the CNT and FAI and if the CNT and FAI would send observers to Mujeres Libres meetings. They decided not to ask for voting status as they were afraid that this might compromise the autonomy of Mujeres Libres.

One statement argued:

"[Mujeres Libres] could have converted itself into an appendage of the union movement with respect to feminine preparation, transforming women into a receptacle of anarcho-syndicalism. It could have converted itself into an annex or a 'Women's Section' of the FAI, but it didn't do this either

had that experience."

Revolutions bring about dramatic social changes. Old expectations, assumptions and ways of behaving begin to be questioned. But change doesn't occur overnight. Rather, change starts with a discussion. It's though the often long and messy process of debate and disagreement that the way in which we see the world is radically altered. So, as we can see in Spain, no revolution is cut and dry.

In areas where they were well organised, such as Terrasa, where anarchist women in the textile industry had a group since 1931, they gained maternity leave and full equality of pay. In many cases, though, the CNT was unable or unwilling to make real its goal of full equality. In textiles, in general, where women formed the overwhelming majority of the workforce they still had the lowest wages.

On the land there was further to go as attitudes lagged even further behind. However, in the collectives women found that for the first time ever they did have a real say, although sometimes not an equal say or vote to the men. In some collectives such as Mazon and Miramel in Aragon women and men were paid the same. In many, though, this was not the case.

These collectives did assume that a woman deserved an income in her own right, which was an advance. Most collectives, though, had a "family wage". This, of course, was almost always paid to the man who would be assumed to be the head of the household. The social division of labour remained. "Women's work" was "women's work" and when women did "men's work" they still got women's wages!

The CNT was committed, at least in theory, to full and absolute equality. They declared, at their 1936 Saragosa conference, that after the revolution "the two sexes will be equal, both in rights and obligations."

In practice, up to 1936, the CNT was failing to draw in women. Women in the union often found that they were not being taken seriously and that sexism was not uncommon. To combat this the Mujeres Libres group was founded in May 1936.

They aimed to empower women, giving them the confidence to become involved in anarchist politics. They saw it as crucial to involve women directly in the struggle for their own liberation. They did not see themselves as feminists, in fact according to one member, Soledad Estorach, most of them had never even heard of feminism. They believed that ending the domination of women by men was part of a larger struggle to abolish all forms of domination.

Unlike the feminists who narrowly focused on the individual liberation of individual women, they believed that the struggle for emancipation was a collective one for anarchism and freedom as a whole. None the less a major part of this fight was against the undervaluing of women within the anarchist movement.

★ **Achievements**

During its short two year existence Mujeres Libres came to number 30,000 women and achieved much throughout republican Spain. A major focus was on education. In Barcelona they set up the Casa de La Dona, a major women's college, in

Free Women of Spain

"It was like being brothers and sisters. It had always annoyed me that men in this country didn't consider women as beings with full human rights. But now there was this big change. I believe it arose spontaneously out of the revolutionary movement."

Margarita Balagar
quoted in 'The Blood of Spain'
by Ronald Frazer, p.287

The position of workers and peasants in Spain in the 1920s and 1930s was bad. If you were female it was appalling. Conditions for Spanish women were oppressive and repressive in the extreme. The position of women in Spain in the 1930's was similar to that in many Muslim countries today. They had no independence, could be "given away" in arranged marriages and single women were not allowed out without chaperones.

The average daily wage of a male agricultural labourer was 3 pesetas, a woman got half this (1.5 pesetas) for working from dawn to dusk. Reforms often did little to benefit women workers. For example, when the republican government of 1931 bought in the eight-hour day this just meant that women could be home at 5pm to cook and clean.

The 1931 government had introduced limited divorce, given women the vote and some limited maternity leave. There was a small movement for women's rights but it was reformist and based on middle class and professional women. Within the anarchist movement there was little discussion of women's issues. However just before the military coup in May 1936 two small groups of anarchist women from Madrid and Barcelona merged to form the Mujeres Libres (Free Women) organisation.

The revolution in Spain began as a reaction to the military coup (see Workers Solidarity no.47). Workers organised by the anarcho-syndicalist CNT union and, to a lesser extent, the socialist UGT union federations took to the streets. The response was spontaneous and courageous, heavily influenced by anarchist ideas that had a deep implantation among Spanish workers and peasants.

Women were everywhere in the initial resistance and fought as full and equal members of the anti-fascist militias up until November 1936, when the republican government ordered women away from the frontline. Many were killed in the battle for Madrid. There were changes in work, leisure and in attitudes towards women.

Women were involved at all levels in the collectivisation of industry and land. Piecework in the home was abandoned as women flooded into the factories. It was a time of tremendous excitement as a wave of revolutionary enthusiasm swept over the republican zone. As one woman, Pepetia Carpena of the Catalan regional committee of Mujeres Libres, put it "even if I had died I wouldn't have wanted not to have

"Since those of us who were it's 'prime movers' were anarchists, we could not accede to a situation in which, within this specific organisation, there would be individuals without a social formation: not could we as anarchists, convert those individuals into blind instruments without contradicting our own anarchist principles"

Mujeres Libres insisted on having speakers in the podiums, and this was granted. Much of the anarchist press was supportive if not enthusiastic. The CNT local unions supported them by participating in the apprenticeship programs and allowing Mujeres Libres speakers into the factories, stopping the assembly lines while they spoke.

"Groups of us would go to collectivised factories, and stop the lines for fifteen or twenty minutes, sometimes up to an hour, and talk to the workers or have little classes. This of course we did only with the approval of the workplace council so we had the support of the unions. We did this throughout Barcelonan - in war industries, textiles, transport, light power, metallurgy and wood - and also in some pueblos. Some days we went to as many as fifty different places."

The CNT provided food, meeting places, support and financial contributions. However all was not rosy. Mujeres Libres comrades encountered sexism from some anarchist men (p151) and felt they weren't being taken seriously and weren't being given enough money.

★ FIJL

Organisational rivalry broke out when the youth movement, the FIJL set up a women's section that seemed to replicate the work being done by Mujeres Libres (p153). They argued that they represented young women while Mujeres Libres represented adult women, however ML felt it was a drain on resources.

The frustration Mujeres Libres felt was compounded when they did not receive official invitations to the Libertarian Movement Congress in Oct. 1938. (p156)

Pura Perez Arcos reports:

"We sailed from the port of Alicante on the afternoon of October 7th, in a small English boat. The group included people from Madrid, Valencia and a variety of places in Andalusia. Our tiny Mujeres Libres delegation was inspired by the great hopes and expectations we had of the congress...to make a trip in those days was very risky, and we all knew it. The harbours were being bombarded every night, and we were totally illegal travellers on this British boat, which had to sail right past Franquista ships. We were due to arrive the next morning, but as we neared the harbour, we could hear the explosions of the fascist bombing of the port. The captain headed north, and we sailed around all that day and night, finally arriving in Barcelona, exhausted and hungry on the morning of the 9th. We were tremen-

dously excited and ready to argue the case for Mujeres Libres on the floor of the congress. But they would not even allow us into the meeting"

Coincidentally Emma Goldman was also trying to get in. While she was given full access, the congress floor only allowed Mujeres Libres into discussions that primarily affected them.

Mujeres Libres tried to get official recognition but this was never put to the vote, as delegates argued that this had not being on the pre-conference agenda and so they had not consulted their groups and so could not vote on it. Instead a motion offering solidarity and support to Mujeres Libres was passed.

Much of the opposition to Mujeres Libres seemed to be around the issue of autonomy, the main objections seem to be

1) that anarchism admitted of no difference by sex and therefore that an organisation oriented only to women could not be truly a libertarian organisation

In response to this they said

"our self-determination cannot be opposed on grounds that Anarchism doesn't admit of sex differences, because then it would be necessary to conclude that, as of now, our Libertarian Organisations are not deserving of that name, because whether by choice or by necessity, it's militants are almost exclusively men!"

2) that Mujeres Libres was causing confusion because it was engaging in work done by the unions.

3) that Mujeres Libres should not be functioning as an autonomous organisation but should be operating within the unions and cultural centres.

In response to these two points, Mujeres Libres argued that the organisation was working both within and outside the unions, and their work needed a much broader and multifaceted approach than any of the existing organisations were capable of. They were active in the unions where the unions had not defended women with appropriate vigour. They were not a separatist organisation and opposed separate women's unions, arguing that women should join with men in existing union organisations.

However these issues were never resolved, and this was to be the last conference before the end of the war.

The first time that Mujeres Libres were to be called to a libertarian meeting as an equal member of the libertarian family, was sadly also to be the last;

I quote Conchita Guillen:

"On the very day of the evacuation of Barcelona [January 24, 1939], when the fascists were practically at the gates, we were called to a meeting of the libertarian movement: CNT, FAI, JJLL and Mujeres Libres. Jacinta Escudero and I attended as delegates of the Local Federation of Mujeres Libres. It was a meeting of some

importance, because it was a crucial moment: we had either to resist, or to abandon [Barcelona]... we put ourselves at the disposition of the movement; they thanked us, but said it would be a useless sacrifice, since they had no strength at all, and we should get out as quickly as possible"

★ Conclusion

For me, this proved a living example of many important aspects of Anarchist theory. Firstly the importance of the relationship of the individual to the collective, how the collective is only as strong as the individuals that make it up.

Secondly, the importance of direct action and self-activity, in both making a revolution and in making revolutionaries.

Direct democracy is more difficult, and more messy in the short term, but in the long term more successful, because the process of negotiating, convincing and organising created revolutionaries and revolutionary communities in a way that giving orders from above never can.

Thirdly, the relationship between idea's and action. The debate on the role of women in Spain, was never a sterile one. It was seen as an ongoing process. Mujeres Libres arose out of the experience of women in struggle, and they emphasised the importance of women learning through work in the factories, the communities and in the libertarian movement. Out of these actions, new idea's arose.