

En Lucha's Andy Durgan: Historical distortions to justify political betrayal of Spanish workers

Part one

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On July 21, 2012, the *Socialist Worker* in Britain published an article, "The miners of Asturias and their long history of struggle," by Andy Durgan. [1]

Durgan is a member of En Lucha, the British Socialist Workers Party's sister organisation in Spain. The article purports to be an examination of the Asturian miners' strike earlier this year against the Popular Party (PP) government's eradication of mining subsidies. The militant dispute, involving some 8,000 workers and their families, featured a 20-day march to Madrid that ended in a mass rally on July 10.

Durgan points out that the Asturian miners have traditionally played a vanguard role in the struggles of the Spanish working class, and that many workers and youth were looking to them for a lead in the fight against the massive austerity measures being imposed by the PP government. But he does so in order to conceal, rather than reveal, the treacherous political role being played by the miners' own trade union leaders—demonstrated by the fact that the dispute was shortly to be betrayed.

Durgan waxes lyrical about the miners' strike and their "Black March" to Madrid. He writes: "Since the transition to democracy the miners have fought desperately to maintain their industry and their livelihoods. Victories have been tempered with the constant shrinking of the mines and state aid."

Referring to the miners' leading role in the fight against Francoite fascism, he continues, "The methods of struggle include occupation of the mines, barricades, and the ingenious use of fireworks and catapults to repel the police. The tactics are reminiscent of the battles of 1934 and 1962."

He concludes, "There is no doubt that the miners struggle is an inspiration for all those fighting austerity and cuts. If the government thought it could sweep aside a relatively small group of workers, it was wrong. Instead, the miners have become a symbol for millions outraged by the attacks on their living standards and working conditions. They are a symbol that could pull together the disparate strands of resistance."

To what victories is Durgan referring? The 48,000 miners who have lost their jobs since 1958, due to the corporatist deals agreed by the bureaucracies of the General Workers Union (Unión General de Trabajadores—UGT) and the Workers Commissions (Comisiones Obreras—CCOO) hardly constitute a victory. The whittling down of the number of Asturian miners to around 8,000 today is not a recommendation for the unions' policy and leadership.

The courageous struggle of the miners, including taking on the police, could not prevent the union leaders from isolating them from other sections of workers and youth. These battles were played out away from the major urban centres and were used by the unions to posture as

opponents of the government, when it is they who are facilitating its deep austerity cuts.

Unlike 1934 and 1962, a fascist regime is not in power in Spain today, but a crisis-ridden right-wing government. Yet, within days of the end of their march, the miners were encouraged to drift back to work, and after a total of 67 days the strike was called off.

The "inspiration" that all those "fighting austerity and cuts" must draw from the experiences of the Asturian miners should be a warning that they cannot leave their fight under the leadership of the trade unions and parties based on a nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective. It is not a "symbol" that workers need, but a Marxist revolutionary strategy, programme and tactics.

Durgan is hostile to this approach. His glorification of the strike is a means by which the ex-left seek to corral workers behind the Stalinists and various petty-bourgeois tendencies grouped around the social democratic Socialist Workers Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español—PSOE) and the trade union bureaucracies.

In the last 17 months, up to 8 million workers and youth have marched through Spain's major cities to denounce the "social terrorism" being waged against them by the troika—the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund—with the backing of both the PP and PSOE.

Widespread hostility to official bourgeois politics and the trade unions means that many of these demonstrations have their origins in social networks created by organisations such as Real Democracy Now (Democracia Real Ya!) and Youth Without a Future (Juventud Sin Futuro). Durgan therefore performs political contortions to try to prove that the unions can be rehabilitated and made to act in workers' interests.

The "contradictory role of the unions is much clearer", he writes. "Many on the radical left and among the indignados movement in Spain treat the unions as part of the system."

"The leadership of the main unions, the socialist UGT and the former communist CCOO (Workers Commissions), are as moderate and treacherous as trade union bureaucracies elsewhere."

"However, the miners are one of the most unionised sectors of workers in Spain, most being members of UGT or CCOO. As has happened in Greece, the union leaders have been forced to fight."

The sole concern of the ex-left is that the trade union bureaucracy is losing its grip over the mass protest movement. There is nowhere in Europe where "the union leaders have been forced to fight", as Durgan claims.

This is not only a question of rotten leadership. More fundamentally, this rottenness is rooted in the fact that the material foundation for trade

union reformism based upon regulation of the national economy has been destroyed by the development of an integrated global economy, where the benchmark for wages and conditions is set in China, India and eastern Europe. As a result, the relationship between the working class and its old organisations has been transformed. Everywhere the trade unions act as enforcers of cuts and austerity, doing nothing more than stage token protests to conceal their collusion with governments and corporate management.

To try and give his account some legitimacy, Durgan peppers his article with historical references to the struggles of the Asturian miners. “As in 1934 and 1962 solidarity is key”, he writes. “A victory for the miners would be a massive blow for the government and for the wave of austerity stalking Europe.”

Durgan deliberately conceals the real historical experiences made by the Spanish working class with these leaderships in the past. Central to this is his omission of any mention of Leon Trotsky’s fight to build a revolutionary party in Spain during the 1930s. By staying silent on the struggle waged by Trotsky for a political alternative to the treacherous misleaders of the working class in an earlier period, he seeks to encourage the most pessimistic conclusions as regards the struggles of today.

One would not glean from Durgan’s account that by 1934 the workers movement internationally had already been through catastrophic experiences due to the betrayals of social democracy and Stalinism.

In the Soviet Union, a bureaucracy headed by Stalin had usurped political power from the working class. Its perspective of building “socialism in one country” reflected the interests and outlook of an increasingly consolidated and self-aware parasitic caste that had grown impatient with the fight for world socialist revolution and now primarily wished to safeguard its privileges. The political line of the Comintern was to be shaped by the efforts to subordinate the interests of the international proletariat to the requirements of the Kremlin bureaucracy.

This involved numerous zigzags in official policy. In 1928, as he turned against the rich farmers, or kulaks, at home—whom he’d originally encouraged—Stalin imposed the “Third Period” line upon the Comintern. This led the German Communist Party to denounce the social democrats in Germany as “social fascists”—an ultra-left, sectarian line that divided the working class and politically prepared the way for the victory of the Nazis.

Confronted with a deepening world economic crisis and the threat from fascist regimes in Germany and Italy, the Soviet bureaucracy lurched sharply to the right—adopting a policy of collaboration with imperialist powers and instructing the Communist parties in every country to enter Popular Front formations in support of the liberal wing of their own bourgeoisie.

Trotsky fought to arm the working class against these policies. In 1923 he had formed the Left Opposition to fight against the growth of bureaucracy within the Soviet Communist Party and the workers state established by the 1917 revolution, and the accompanying rise of nationalist tendencies.

The break by the rising bureaucracy headed by Stalin from the program of world socialist revolution that had guided the revolution was expressed in 1924 in its adoption of the policy of “socialism in one country”.

Events in Spain, where Trotsky was working to build a section of the Left Opposition, would prove critical in the struggle against the degeneration and ultimate collapse of the Comintern under Stalin.

Durgan fails to acknowledge any of these world political events in his article. Instead, the Asturian miners’ struggles are viewed purely through the narrow lens of middle-class parochialism and nationalism.

The Asturian miners’ fight in 1934 was not simply a trade union struggle, as Durgan tries to imply, but was part of a revolutionary upsurge of the Spanish proletariat. By beginning his article in 1934, he conveniently bypasses the critical political developments leading up to

this period so as not to pose such vexed questions as the program and history of the political tendencies that dominated the workers movement in Spain and eventually led to its defeat.

This includes the betrayal carried out by the PSOE. In April 1931, republican candidates had won a large majority in the municipal elections, forcing King Alfonso XIII into exile. Faced with an insurgent movement, Manuel Azaña Díaz of the Reformist Republican Party (Partido Reformista) took over as prime minister in December and formed a coalition with the PSOE.

The PSOE’s inclusion in the government was critical. A new constitution was agreed that came into force in December, but its intention was never to impinge on private property or the bourgeois state.

The coalition government made only minimal reforms, refusing to deal with the land question, raise wages or improve working conditions, seriously reduce the power of the Church, dissolve the hated Civil Guard, or raise taxes on the rich. At the same time, it clamped down on unofficial strikes and allowed the right wing to regroup.

As class antagonisms intensified, the Azaña government fell and a right-wing coalition led by Alejandro Lerroux of the Radical Republican Party (Partido Republicano Radical) was installed in November 1933. Dependent on the Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Rightist Groups (Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas—CEDA), it began to take back Azaña’s limited social reforms, restore the power of the Catholic Church, and prepare for civil war.

Durgan is silent on the PSOE betrayal and its consequences. Trotsky explained: “The Socialist Party [PSOE], like the Russian Social[ist] Revolutionaries and Mensheviks, shared power with the republican bourgeoisie to prevent the workers and peasants from carrying the revolution to its conclusion. For two years the Socialists in power helped the bourgeoisie disembarass itself of the masses by crumbs of national, social and agrarian reforms. Against the most revolutionary strata of the people, the Socialists used repression.

“The result was twofold. Anarcho-syndicalism, which would have melted like wax in the heat of revolution had the workers’ party pursued a correct course, was strengthened and drew around it the militant layers of the proletariat. At the other pole, social catholic demagoguery succeeded in skilfully exploiting the discontent of the masses with the bourgeois-socialist government.” [2]

To be continued.

Notes:

[1] Andy Durgan, “The miners of Asturias and their long history of struggle”, *Socialist Worker* no. 2312. (July 21, 2012) <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=29104>

[2] Leon Trotsky, *Whither France?* (1934), New Park Publications, 1974, pp. 31-32



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