

Living Anarchism. José Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist Movement by Chris Ealham, AK Press

In August 1989, José Peirats — anarchist militant, brickmaker, baker, propagandist and chronicler of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT labour unions — ended his intensely lived span of eighty-one years by walking into the sea at Burriana beach. A multitude of deteriorating health issues including Parkinson's disease meant he could no longer face life — or death — with dignity. As his biographer, Chris Ealham, observes: "As a lifelong activist, existence had little meaning without action — this had been the principle that guided him in his struggle for a better Spain."

Ealham's engrossing account of the Peirats story, however, is not simply the odyssey of one union militant's noble life of selfless struggle against uneven odds; it is a riveting, albeit distinctly uncomfortable, complex, warts-and-all portrait of shameful treachery ending in the ignominious morphing of a once-dynamic libertarian working-class organisation into the monolithic monstrosity that was, from 1945 forward, the Toulouse-based MLE-CNT (Movimiento Libertario Español-CNT-in-exile). *Living Anarchism: José Peirats and the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist Movement* is a salutary 'warning from history' — and is essential reading for all libertarians and historians of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism.

José Peirats was born in 1908 in the Valencian village of La Vall d'Uixó, the second child of Teresa Valls Rubert and José Peirats Dupla, 'alpargateros' who earned their living making canvas and jute rope soled espadrilles — or 'alpargatas'. Teresa, his mother, was the driving force in the family, and it was her dissatisfaction with rural life that led to the family moving to Barcelona's Poble Sec district with its substantial Valencian population. Here, in 1916, at the age of eight, Peirats left primary school to begin his working life in a succession of short-lived dead-end jobs.

Teresa, anxious to ensure her son's ongoing education, enrolled José in the nearby Workers' Rationalist Athenaeum, a night school inspired by the non-hierarchical educational principles of the recently executed anarchist teacher Francisco Ferrer y Guardia. Unfortunately, the young Peirats's time here was cut short by the vicious anti-working class repression unleashed following the Catalan general strike of August 1917. This resulted in the outlawing of the CNT unions and the closure of their meeting halls and the associated free schools and athenaeums, which were seen by the authorities as the seedbeds of revolution.

Young José found a job as brickmaker, but a congenital hip cartilage problem (Legg-Calvé-Perthes disease) that caused him to limp slightly impeded his mobility (it became more pronounced in his twenties) in the dangerous environment of the brickworks so at the age of ten he moved on to work in a glass factory. However, in the tumultuous industrial unrest of the time, that job didn't last long either. Laid off after an unsuccessful glassworkers' strike, José returned to brick making, the trade from which he was to earn his livelihood, mostly, for the next twenty years.

It was in 1922 that José, a fourteen-year old time-served apprentice, joined Barcelona CNT's Brickmakers' Society (la Sociedad de Ladrilleros), part of the CNT's militant Construction Union. This coincided with the long-drawn-out brickmakers' strike of 1923, which lasted from February through to September that year, a strike that finally collapsed with the military coup of General Primo de Rivera. The experience was a rite of passage for Peirats, marking his radical coming-of-age and turning him into 'un obrero consciente', a class-conscious worker.

Embarrassed by his lack of education and culture, the teenage Peirats, under the tutelage of his socialist uncle Benjamin, and Juan Roigé, his former teacher at the Sants Rationalist School, began to read seriously and extensively and, supported by the latter, he went back to evening classes.

In 1928, with the threat of military service lifted on medical grounds, Peirats focused his attention on helping to reorganise the still-clandestine CNT and launching a publication entitled *El Boletín del Ladrillero* [Brickmakers' Bulletin]. Its purpose was, he stated, 'to instil our members with a social culture. We had swotted up on literature and sociology during the eight-years' peace of the dictatorship. We hadn't wasted any time.'

Peirats was now a dedicated class-struggle anarchist, deeply involved with the CNT defence groups and with a healthy distrust of middle-class anarchist intellectuals. He took a particular dislike — understandably — to anarchist publisher Juan Montseny (Federico Urales) and his even more overbearing daughter Federica.

The collapse of Primo de Rivera's military dictatorship in January 1930 marked for Peirats the beginning of what he later described as an 'infernal decade of action'. As well as his commitment to the anarchist affinity (friendship) group, 'Verdad' [Truth] the escalating activities of the still-clandestine CNT took up most of his time, activities that culminated on 14 April 1931 in the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic. Not only a 'man of action', the twenty-three-year-old Peirats found himself thrust into the role of public speaker and industrial organiser. Complicating his life even further was the collapse of another brickmakers' strike and a deterioration in his hip condition, which meant having to change his trade yet again — to that of baker.

The early 1930s in Spain was a time of deep divisions within the extended CNT family of anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and unionists of other persuasions. It was the perennial struggle between revolutionaries and reformists. The latter were the so-called 'treintistas', thirty prominent CNT 'moderates' who were signatories to a provocative and divisive anti-insurrectionary and anti-anarchist manifesto. As Peirats himself acknowledged — who usually steered a middle course in these matters — there were 'demagogues' on all sides, including his own.

The first CNT-led revolutionary insurrection took place in 1932 at Alt Llobregat, a mining district in northern Catalonia. This was followed in January 1933 by a more widespread rising, and another in December of that same year. None of these directly involved Peirats who, although sympathetic to the 'maximalist' position of the abolition of the state and the direct and immediate mass sequestration of industry by the workers themselves, and far from being a pacifist, was critical of what he called the 'insurrectionary adventurism' and 'unaccountable vanguardism of elitist groups acting without democratic mandate from grassroots assemblies'. He was equally opposed — on ethical, strategic and psychological grounds — to armed robberies, the so-called 'expropriations' popular with the action and defence groups who saw it as a means of topping up the unions' coffers and supporting its prisoners and their families. As Peirats saw it, these actions had a tendency to shift from being a means to an end, to ends in themselves, leading to corruption and criminality with the participants ending up marginalised and compromised — and keeping much of the proceeds of their criminal acts to fund their precarious clandestine lifestyles. His principled opposition to what he constantly denounced as 'banditry' brought him into direct conflict with many of the FAI affinity — and CNT defence groups. (Later, after 1945, as secretary of the MLE-CNT-in-exile, this predilection for 'illegalism' among some sectors of the movement — i.e., those involved in the clandestine anti-Francoist guerrilla movement — caused him considerable complications within the organisation and led to him being compromised, arrested, tortured and jailed.)

After the revolution of July 1936, the twenty-eight-year old Peirats — who had taken part in the initial storming of Barcelona's Pedralbes barracks on 19 July — became a thorn in the flesh of the key players in the newly co-opted higher committees of the Catalan CNT-FAI. Under pressure from astute and wily politicians such as Catalan President Lluís Companys and terrified of 'going for broke' (the abolition of the state; most of industry was now under workers' control) they abandoned whatever anarchist principles they paid lip service to in order to throw in their lot, unnecessarily, with their far more canny political enemies, first in the Militias Committee, then in the Generalitat — the Catalan parliament — and finally in the Madrid governments. I'm referring here, particularly, to Federica Montseny, her partner Germinal Esgleas, García Oliver, the weak-willed and incompetent CNT secretary-general Mariano Rodríguez Vázquez, and Pedro Herrera and Diego Abad de Santillán of the FAI, the Iberian Anarchist Federation. Fidel Miró, of the Libertarian Youth (Juventudes Libertarias), described Peirats at the time as the 'leader' of the 'redskins', as those opposed to government collaboration were known.

Perhaps to distance himself from the stultifying orbit of the self-appointed pro-governmental cabal — who, under the pretext of war and with most of the more able militants at the front, had seized control of the higher committees of the Catalan CNT — Peirats accepted an invitation from the secretary of the Lleida CNT Defence Committee and the FAI-affiliated local federation of anarchist groups to move to Lleida and take over as editor of the local anarchist daily,

Acracia, a newspaper that he soon turned into one of the foremost critics of the Catalan CNT-FAI leadership. Peirats had been building his journalistic experience since 1928 when he first began writing for the anarchist press. Since 1934 — while still working fulltime as a brickmaker — he had been on the editorial board of Solidaridad Obrera, the Catalan anarcho-syndicalist daily.

The leaders of the Catalan CNT-FAI took their revenge on Acracia with all the administrative, economic and bureaucratic powers at their disposal. It was a campaign of intimidation and suppression that peaked in the aftermath of the Events of May 1937; only then was the CNT-FAI leadership able to isolate its critics and reassert its control over its rebellious rank-and-file. But it was too late; the morale and euphoria that had defeated the attempted military-fascist coup and gave impetus to the extraordinary revolutionary dream of 19 July 1936 had been broken by the treachery, compromises and incompetence of its own self-appointed leaders.

Against this background a disheartened Peirats turned his back on the struggle in the rearguard and made his way to the village of Monegrillo where he enlisted as a 'clerical sergeant' in the 26th Division of the Republican army, the now militarised former Durruti Column. He remained in its ranks until 10 February 1939 when he and the remnants of the Division crossed into France to begin a new phase of their lives as 'gypsies of exile' in a French concentration camp.

Peirats was one of the lucky ones who managed to embark on a boat to Central America before the Nazi occupation of France, and for the next few years he wandered, a penniless exile, from the Dominican Republic through Ecuador and Panama, until finally settling in Venezuela in 1946 where he immersed himself in journalism, writing for the Toulouse-based Libertarian Youth paper Ruta. It was from Caracas, in early 1947, that the CNT organisation there delegated him to attend the April 1947 MLE-CNT Intercontinental conference in Toulouse as the Venezuelan CNT-in-exile's representative.

In France, Peirats was appalled at the extent of the bureaucratisation of the Montseny-Esgleas-controlled MLE-CNT. He was equally concerned at the influence exercised by former railwayman and anarcho-syndicalist militant Laureano Cerrada Santos, an entrepreneurial genius and a key French Resistance figure, who, since the Liberation, had built a substantial commercial empire funded through international arms sales, forged documents and currency, import-export operations, a transport company, hotels, a wood mill and other questionable 'criminal' and black market enterprises. Not only did Cerrada finance and providing the logistics and materiel for the armed anti-Francoist guerrilla resistance movement, he also subsidised the administrative costs and wages of the entire Toulouse-based MLE-CNT operation, including its presses and newsprint and the distribution of its newspapers and periodicals.

Esgleas detested Cerrada, but his greed and constant need for money sucked him irrevocably into the latter's orbit. It was a marriage of convenience, each ignoring the other's character flaws, at least in the short term. Cerrada provided the funds while Esgleas, as National Secretary, pulled the strings of the MLE in exile and constantly manoeuvred to dominate the Organisation in Spain and bring it under his control, even to the extent — I personally am convinced — of regularly betraying the identities of the National Committees of the Interior to the Francoist security services.

Before the war in Spain the CNT, with a membership of well over a million, had only one paid official; now the National Committee of the MLE-CNT in exile employed a staff of seven full-time paid workers; CNT, the Organisation's newspaper, had nine paid workers, while the FIJL had a full-time staff of four. Effectively the Organisation was in hock to Cerrada and, consequently, heavily compromised — and a hostage to fortune with the French authorities through its relationship with an unaccountable 'illegalist' of his calibre, no matter how committed Cerrada was to both the CNT, to the anti-Francoist resistance — and to the Idea.

Cerrada had to go. The problem was that Esgleas, Montseny and others were too deeply compromised in their relationship with him, financially and morally, to exert any influence over him. The reality was he terrified them, which was why it suited everyone when José Peirats took over as secretary general in 1947 to initiate the process of expelling Cerrada from the CNT.

Apart from the questionable morality or ethics of Cerrada's illegal and clandestine activities, the Toulouse 'notables' were more concerned about the French police uncovering his complex criminal empire and implicating them in a general conspiracy charge that would compromise the emigré Organisation. Matters came to a head in 1950, when on 'information received', the French police arrested Cerrada for forging the new-issue German Deutschmarks. During their investigations the police discovered that almost everyone in Toulouse's Rue Belfort was on Cerrada's payroll, and that he held substantial IOUs from Esgleas and Montseny. Interestingly, in the run-up to his arrest, Cerrada had been proving such a nuisance to the Toulouse notables — and the authorities on both sides of the border — that Esgleas and his close associate Roque Santamaria had even discussed the possibility of having him murdered. Organising his arrest was a simpler solution. As Cerrada later discovered, it was Esgleas who betrayed him to Commissioner Tarateau, head of the French security service in the Eastern Pyrenees.

Peirats's election as secretary-general of the new National Committee of the MLE-CNT in 1947 meant he could set about trying to eliminate the bureaucracy and reduce the influence of both the FAI — which was operating as a quasi-masonic mafia within the emigré Organisation, a mafia manipulated by Esgleas, Montseny, Herrera and their cronies — and of Laureano Cerrada, whose creatures they were, and who were reliant on his benevolence. The CNT, he argued, needed to be financially self-reliant; the difficulty being that, by 1947, the dues-paying membership had dropped to under 24,000, and was continuing to haemorrhage.

Another of Peirats' preoccupations, although there was little he could do about it, was his awareness that the Toulouse-based MLE-CNT was no longer, by any stretch of the imagination, a labour union. It had no connection with the Spanish working class or the ability to uphold and defend its economic and political interests. As he later admitted, 1947-48 was the most awful year of his life as a militant: 'A CNT without unions is inconceivable...' ; 'it would have been better simply to have established a Spanish anarchist movement in France, without a CNT, which could, perforce, never function as a class-struggle union and which had, over time, become a monstrous parody of its former self...' The once-great Confederation was, he said, nothing but a cult to a glorious past' and 'an organisation of the living dead'.

Although re-elected secretary after a year, Peirats chose not to take up the post, arguing that activists should not serve two consecutive terms in the same position. He did, however, accept the editorship of *Ruta*, the anarchist youth publication, but with funds running low he resigned the post to work as a day-labourer with comrades on a collectively run smallholding near Toulouse — while still writing for *Ruta*. It was around this time he was approached by the CNT's Culture and Propaganda Secretary who commissioned, him, with an advance of 5,000 francs, to write the history of the Spanish Revolution.

The first volume of *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution* appeared in Spanish in 1951, an otherwise unlucky year for Peirats. With tragic irony he, the principal opponent of expropriations and illegalism, was arrested in February, charged with receiving six million francs, the proceeds of an armed robbery, in January, of a post office van in Lyon in which two policemen and a bystander were shot dead. Although badly beaten, Peirats stuck to his story that he had had no involvement with — or knowledge of — this high-profile robbery, which had been carried out by Spanish guerrillas, all CNT members according to a French Interior Ministry report. Unfortunately, this scandal coincided with the opening up of diplomatic and commercial relations between France and Spain and with the Francoist authorities pressing not only for extraditions and the closure of the Spanish anarchist press in France — in which they succeeded for a time — while also pressurising the French authorities to expel all the emigrés from the border area, something the French authorities were seriously considering.

Peirats spent five months in a French prison as a result of the Lyon post-office van robbery, during which time he worked on the subsequent volumes of *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*, but it was almost a year to the day before the charges against him were finally dropped. In the meantime, Cerrada had been expelled from the CNT on the grounds of having used 'inadmissible and immoral methods', and bringing the Organisation into disrepute. (In spite of his expulsion, Cerrada remained an influential figure within the activist anarchist milieu, including *Defensa Interior* and

the First of May Group, until his murder in October 1976.) Despite the lack of funds, the final two volumes of his magnum opus were published in 1952 and 1953 (and in English in 2001–06, edited and introduced by Peirats's biographer Chris Ealham).

Although he ceased to be a member of the CNT in 1965, for the next twenty-four years of his life, Peirats, with the support of his life partner Gracia Ventura, whom he met in 1954, tenaciously and passionately alternating between the roles of Cassandra and a one-man Greek Chorus, continued, throughout the 1950s to the late 1980s, to observe, polemicise, criticise and comment, often rancorously, on the declining fortunes — and nature — of the CNT and its militants, its hangers-on and anti-democratic functionaries. An old-fashioned type, like many of the more puritanical 'Generation of '36', he found it difficult to come to terms with the ideas and bohemian lifestyles and behaviour of the generation of gay and feminist activists and 'New Leftists' that came of age in the wake of the events of May 1968 in Paris, and those who emerged in Spain a few years later in the wake of the death of Franco.

Chris Ealham's life of José Peirats provides an engrossingly readable insight into history through biography. It is, as he says, a study 'of the human foundations of the anarchist movement, and of its twentieth-century history, about reclaiming 'the historical memory of anarchism and its role in the twentieth-century', above all, however, it is the story of a humble and honest man who risked his life and liberty in defence of an idea, and of social justice.

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