

In Defence of the POUM

Camillo Berneri

1 May 1937

The press of the Third International, following the instructions of the government of the USSR, are prosecuting a violent campaign against the POUM, the Unified Workers Marxist Party of Spain.

The tendentiousness and violence of this campaign is unprecedented.

The Bolshevik journalist Michel Koltsov has described all the activists of the POUM as despicable and has reported that ‘the detachments of the POUM belonging to the international brigades were dissolved and their commander expelled from the Madrid front’ (*L’Humanité*, Paris, 24 Jan 1937). The ‘entryist’ Italian Communist newspaper *Il Grido del Popolo* in Paris (14 March 1937) states in one of its reports from Barcelona:

And what of the Trotskyists of the POUM? In the midst of this great enthusiasm, this heroic new effort that the people are engaged in, these agents of fascism organised over the course of several days for a truck to drive around the city with an enormous inscription stating: ‘We are organising the struggle against fascism at the front and the struggle against reformism in the rear!’

These counterrevolutionaries have plumbed such depths that they hide away from fighting against fascism at the front but are happy to fight against reformism in the rear, that is to say against the efforts of the Popular Front to put the nation on a war footing. But the people of Spain, by meting out justice to these bandits, are marching directly to victory!

In Spain the press and the representatives of the PSUC [Unified Socialist Party of Cataluña, the Catalan affiliate of the Third International] use similar language. *Mundo Obrero*, the mouthpiece of the Communist Party of Spain, affirmed in the edition of 29 January 1937:

We must struggle without pause against the Trotskyists. They are the greatest collaborators of Franco in our country... The POUM represents the most advanced position of the enemy in our own camp...

In every revolutionary movement the most dangerous elements are those who hide behind the guise of friendship in order to murder from behind. In every war the most dangerous elements are not the enemies in the opposing trenches, but the spies and saboteurs. And the POUM is an example of this.

In its edition of 27 January 1937, *Ahora*, mouthpiece of the United Socialist Youth (JSU), stated: ‘Let us liquidate once and for all this fraction of the fifth column. The Soviet people, with their implacable justice against the group of Trotskyist saboteurs and murderers, have shown us the way’.

Joan Comorera, an influential representative of the PSUC and of the UGT [Socialist trade union] in the Catalan government, said in his speech of 24 January 1937: ‘Those

who criticise the Council of the Generalitat [the Catalan government] are agents provocateurs who come from the social underworld'. And he further added: 'Death, not to fascism which has already been liquidated on the field of battle, but to the agents provocateurs'. At the same rally, Uribe, the Communist deputy, proclaimed: 'To win the war it is necessary to remove the cancer of Trotskyism', and Carrillo, general secretary of the JSU, affirmed that 'The policy of the Trotskyists – by saying that they are struggling for the social revolution – is the policy of the invaders, is the policy of the fascists.' Even the UGT press has published absurdities such as: 'The radio stations of Turin and Bolzano [in fascist Italy] are perfectly synchronised with *La Batalla* [the POUM daily newspaper] and with the POUM's radio stations' (*Claridad*, 26 January 1937).

The defamation of the POUM is of such a scale that it is worth compiling examples as documentary evidence of the bad faith of the Comintern and its centrist priests. It is sufficient to remember, citing one example among many, that the newspaper of the Norwegian Communist Party *Ny Tid* (in its editions of 28 January and 16 February 1937) even insinuated that Maurín, shot by the fascists, was still alive and well and strolling unmolested around the streets of Burgos [capital city of the Francoist zone].¹ That the campaign against the POUM was dreamt up in Moscow is one of many pieces of evidence that we have obtained through journalists, such as the obliging Koltsov, who have directed their attacks with the help of the Russian Consul, just as the Russian Consul in Barcelona published a note accusing *La Batalla* of having 'sold out to international fascism'.

Moscow prevented anti-fascist Spain from providing Trotsky with asylum and vetoed the POUM's presence in the Junta de Defensa [defence council] of Madrid and in the Council of the Generalitat in Cataluña. Moscow desires a *strong government* from which we would be excluded ('those who insult the USSR'). The slander and threats were followed by highly regrettable deeds: in Madrid the headquarters of the POUM youth was invaded and wrecked; the newspapers of the POUM were suspended and fined, and both *Treball* [the PSUC newspaper] and *Mundo Obrero* have begun to call for the suppression of the POUM. Obviously, the only beneficiaries of this situation are the fascists. *La Batalla* was suspended for four days by the Council of the Generalitat in Cataluña, and immediately Radio Burgos reported that differences at the heart of the Popular Front had become more severe and that the editor of *La Batalla* had been arrested for publishing violent articles directed against the government in Valencia. And *Le Temps* on 18 March 1937 brought to light telegrams from Burgos and Barcelona in reference to the suspension of the POUM daily under the headline *Political Differences Sharpen*.

¹ Translator's note: Joaquín Maurín, co-founder and leader of the POUM, was widely assumed to have been killed in the first days of the civil war, when Maurín was in Galicia, which fell to the military coup. In fact, he was alive, albeit in a fascist prison, his captors having failed to recognise him.

What is the attitude of the anarchists to the struggle between the PSUC and the POUM?

The pro-Communist Parisian weekly *Vendredi* in its edition of 26 March 1937 acknowledged, in a report by Marc Bernard, that the anarchists ‘act as a moderating influence between the PSUC and the POUM, two parties engaged in an increasingly bitter conflict... They insist that all efforts should be directed into the struggle against the common enemy and plead with both one and the other party to adopt a more courteous tone in their discussions.’

And this, in fact, is the truth. A manifesto of the Libertarian Youth of Barcelona puts it as follows:

We are not prepared to join with those who out of simple political ambition attempt to drown certain comrades in shameful discredit by launching gigantic waves of calumny and infamy against them, knowing their claims to be untrue, as is now happening against the Iberian Communist Youth [the JCI – youth wing of the POUM].

Today we cry out with the full force of our lungs: enough! Enough! It is unjust that those with unhealthy ambition are trying to eliminate an organisation which has fought, and which continues to fight, alongside everyone else for the triumph of the Spanish revolution.

In reply to the pogromist speech by Comorera cited above, *Solidaridad Obrera*, mouthpiece of the Catalan CNT, stated in its edition of 6 February 1937:

If comrade Comorera does not take it the wrong way, we’d like to offer him some fraternal advice: be prudent, control your tongue, demonstrate that sense of responsibility that you recommend so much in others, abandon puerile aspirations and work nobly for the common cause without provoking storms of indignation through inopportune interventions. Consider that the old way of doing politics is intolerable, its procedures ill-advised; bear in mind that we live in Cataluña, that we are in the middle of a war and that we are struggling for the revolution.

If you claim that those who *criticise the Council of the Generalitat are agents provocateurs who stir up the underworld* you are breaking the discipline that it is our duty to impose.

In his speech to the municipal session of 12 February 1937, the CNT mayor of Girona, Expedito Durán, affirmed that: ‘It is an absurdity that no one believes – even the one who wrote it – to say that the POUM is in the service of fascism. The POUM has proven itself to be an indisputably antifascist and authentically revolutionary party.’

The CNT and the anarchist press in general made similar declarations.

A party that has seen several leading representatives fall in the struggle (Maurín [sic], [Hipólito] Etchebehere, José Oliver, Germinal Vidal, Pedro Villarose, Louis Blanes etc), and who occupy second place in the struggle against fascism in terms of cadre in the field and losses, cannot be presented as a collection of rogues and ‘agents of Franco-Hitler-Mussolini’ except by hiding the truth and doing outrage to justice. And this is what the press of the Comintern, from *Pravda* to *L’Humanité* and from *Treball* to *Mundo Obrero*, continues to do.

A party that is the predominant influence in certain localities, especially in Cataluña, and which has thousands of men on the various fronts, is not a force to be sniffed at. To speak of suppressing that party, as advocated by some in the PSUC, is more than a crime against liberty, it is an act of sabotage against the anti-fascist struggle.

What, then, is the POUM?

It was formed in Cataluña in September 1935, as a result of the fusion between the Workers’ and Peasants’ Bloc [BOC] with the Communist Left and certain revolutionary elements active in the CNT. In 1919 this anarchist leaning union organisation had joined, under the influence of Pestaña, the Communist International, but in 1922 the Congress of Zaragoza reasserted the organisation’s autonomy. A group of activists in the CNT remained loyal to the Communist International, albeit criticising certain tactics, and attempted, with Maurín in a leading role, to give a Marxist orientation to the Catalan revolutionary movement. The Communist Party of Spain, formed in 1920 by Borodin, an emissary of the International, was limited to the fusion of nuclei of social democrat sympathisers of Bolshevism. The Communist International imposed a policy that caused numerous splits in the party. A first group split off together with Arquer, Miravittles, Coll, Montserrat, Rodes and others, and in 1930 the Catalan Communist Federation as a whole, finding itself in disagreement with the Muscovite line, was expelled.

The BOC was formed in March 1931 through the fusion of that federation with the opposition group that had left earlier on. It consolidated itself in Cataluña but had other networks of supporters in Asturias, Madrid, Levante and in the south. Highlighting the threat of fascism, the BOC advocated the ‘Workers’ Alliance’. In September 1935, as a consequence of the fusion of the BOC with the Communist Left, the POUM was formed.

On 19 July 1936 the POUM was at the side of the FAI and the CNT during the heroic resistance to the military-fascist putsch and organised eight thousand men in columns who marched to different fronts.

The POUM cannot be defined as a Trotskyist party, given that it has no direct or important links with Trotsky, who abjures it, nor with his followers, who attack it. There is a small fraction within it which could, in broad brush strokes, be considered Trotskyist, but the majority of Spanish Trotskyists are outside of the POUM.

It is said that the POUM is opposed to the USSR. In reality, however, it glorifies the Russian revolution of October 1917, declares that it would support the defence of the Russian proletariat if it was attacked by a bourgeois state, and unceasingly praises the

aid provided by the Russian people to antifascist Spain. On the other hand, it does not burn incense for Stalin or show support for Bolshevik pan-Slavism, and furthermore it denies the right of the government of the USSR to impose its policy onto the Spanish people in exchange for aid.

Finally, it is also said that the POUM is opposed to the Popular Front. In reality, this party is opposed to the tendency that wants to disassociate the civil war from the social revolution.

The programme of the JCI, which has ten thousand members, was issued in February 1937 and advocated the following:

Repeal of the bourgeois Constitution of 14 April 1931 and dissolution of Parliament: assemblies of delegates from the factory committees, peasants and militias to elect the revolutionary workers' government; political rights for all young people of eighteen years of age, without distinction of sex; dissolution of the organs of bourgeois justice and creation of a system of workers' justice; the same with regard to the police; purging of the bureaucracy.

The JCI declares that to win the war the following measures are necessary: dissolution of the cadres of the bourgeois army; general mobilisation of the youth; single military command; purging of the war school; the military preparation of the youth; the development of a powerful war industry and the organisation of voluntary and obligatory war work; employment of detained fascists in fortification building.

The JCI does not renounce the proletarian revolution, which in our conception is of a piece with the civil war, and which must create a new proletarian economy, characterised by the socialisation of large industry, of the bank and of the land, a monopoly on foreign trade and the bringing of public services under municipal control.

This programme, whose main points we have highlighted, does not correspond entirely to our current positions or to our aspirations, but none of us can describe it as counterrevolutionary.

If the POUM was the predominant political force in Spain, our criticisms would surely relate to concrete events. But today the POUM constitute a considerable element in the antifascist struggle, as well as in the ranks of those resisting the asphyxiation of the revolution, and therefore our theoretical differences count for little alongside our existing and potential unity on the field of action.

Many aspects of the POUM's critique and many of its slogans correspond to the facts and represent a potential contribution to the development of the Spanish social revolution.

Against the dominant opinion and the underhand manoeuvrings of the PSUC we must affirm, energetically and tirelessly, the value of free political pluralism in the

union organisations and the absolute necessity of anti-fascist unity of action. It is vital that we avoid a monk-like silence. It is necessary to say loud and clear that anyone who insults and slanders the POUM and advocates its suppression is a saboteur of the anti-fascist struggle who will not be tolerated.

This position, as well as being appropriate to the seriousness of the moment and responding to the anarchistic spirit, constitutes the best protection against the counterrevolutionary dictatorship that is ever more perceptible in the PSUC's programme of democratic restoration and in the separation of revolution and war advocated by certain myopic and disorientated revolutionaries.

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Retrieved on 4 June 2023 from abcwithdannyandjim.substack.com.

This is the last published article by Camillo Berneri, one of the most significant anarchist thinkers of the twentieth century, prior to his murder by Stalinists in Barcelona on 5 May 1937. Originally published on 1 May 1937 in the Italian-language publication *L'adunata dei refrattari* in New York, this translation is based on the Spanish text included in Camillo Berneri, *Humanismo y Anarquismo*, ed. by Ernest Cañada (Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 1998). Translation by Danny Evans.

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