

Spanish state : The Trotskyism of the Liga (1971-1991)

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This was written as the Prologue to the Castilian-language edition of Daniel Bensaid's book on « Trotskyisms » by Miguel Romero a long-time central leader of the LCR in the Spanish state, today a member of Izquierda Anticapitalista. It was translated and published as a contribution towards the report on the balance sheet of party-building experiences in the Spanish state for the 2013 meeting of the IC of the Fourth International.

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In the preface to his book, Daniel Bensaid “warns” us that “the history of Trotskyist movements remains to be written” and that his purpose is only to “offer a point of view and give meaning to the political and theoretical debates that have marked this tormented history.” These remarks also apply to the short essay that follows.

I am not going to refer to “Trotskyist movements” in the Spanish State, but rather only to the Liga. This is rather more limited than the approach of Bensaid's book, but this is not so important in the Spanish case. As opposed to France, other Trotskyist organizations did not play a role in the Liga, save for a brief and disgraceful episode in 1979 that I cover below. What's more, in my opinion the Liga was the only organization that embodied that “specific variant of Trotskyism” that Bensaid considers to be “...undoubtedly insufficient but no less necessary to eliminate the confusion between Stalinism and communism ; and to unburden the living of the weight of the dead and close the chapter of disillusionment.”

Hard as it may be to believe that so much time has already gone by, the Liga ceased to exist 15 years ago. The documented record of its history is stored in so many trunks, within thousands of pages of newspapers and bulletins where you can find the detailed record of resolutions and debates, majority and minority positions, and voting results, including from the underground years. This is evidence of a democratic culture that for the Liga was seen to be as normal as the air we breathed, but that was also absolutely unique on the Left. Not to be officious about it, but it would be interesting and useful to organize, select and publish these materials. But this has to be a collective undertaking ; some work in this direction is already underway and I hope it bears fruit.

There is also an indispensable “unwritten history” of the Liga in the memories of its members ; and this is a history full of diversity, contradiction, inhibition and wounds. There is an Arabic proverb that says that “Truth can’t be found in a single dream, but in many dreams.” The history of the Liga can’t be found in one person’s memories, but in the memories of many people. An initiative has also been taken to gather and comb through these memories ; it would be wonderful if this project were to be completed.

Anyone interested in the history of the Liga should hope that these projects succeed. In the notes that follow, you will only read some opinions about a few memories — a personal point of view on the meaning of the Liga’s work and on the reasoning behind the revolutionary commitment that it made during its 20 years of existence, replete with successes and failures.

I

When the Liga joined the Fourth International (FI) — an event that coincided with the Liga’s creation in early 1971 — it was the result of an encounter and not of a conversion.

From the vantage point of the forced political and intellectual asylum that was Francoist Spain in its twilight years, a group primarily made up of university students from the “Felipe” organizations (the Frente de Liberación Popular in Madrid and the Front Obrer Catalá in Barcelona) was trying to find a way to build a revolutionary party and understand the turbulent world of the early 1970s. Marxists more by intuition than through study, they were activists and organizers in democratic student unions — a superb school for understanding the meaning of “bureaucracy” and “reformism”, thanks to daily clashes with the Communist Party of Spain (PCE). They were internationalist and anti-Stalinist by way of their reference to Che, and shared a militant commitment forged by pain and anger at the murder of Enrique Ruano.

During the nearly two-year period of debates and improvised activist work that followed the dissolution of the “Felipe” group in 1969, these activists came into contact with the FI through the French LCR. The LCR’s predecessor organization, the JCR, had been our connection and interpreters as we sought to understand and then spread the “return of the revolution” in May 1968.

We were not looking for a doctrine, but rather an activist Marxist current that could provide roots and meaning to our work. The encounter with the FI took place because that’s who was at hand — with their coherent analysis of “late capitalism” and of “unequal and combined” political processes in France, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Mexico, Vietnam and elsewhere. We saw ourselves politically and even generationally in the organizations of the FI. We discovered revolutionary Marxism and the history of the first years of the Communist International ; the struggle against Stalinism and solidarity with the revolutions in Algeria, Cuba and beyond.

Trotsky was one of the protagonists of this history. Still, we preferred to define ourselves more as the heirs of “communists who fought Stalinism” than as “Trotskyists”. The difference wasn’t just terminological, since it expressed one of the most powerful ideas in the FI program – that of Stalinism as a tragic break in the trajectory of the revolutionary workers movement, and of our current as the continuation of that trajectory, putting up resistance through the darkest days of Stalinist hegemony. And when revolution was at long last once again becoming a “present-day task”, we were ready to fight to infuse communism with the emancipatory hope that had given rise to it in the first place.

II

For the newcomers that we were, the FI was an accelerated training program from which we received an avalanche of reading material, programs, resolutions, active solidarity, and generally enthusiastic news reports about struggles in the world and the growth of the FI's "sections".

Taken together, this was more of a culture ("a way of doing politics", we would say today) than a theory, ideology or program. I'm not trying to minimize the importance of the programmatic content (internationalism, socialist revolution, self-organization as the basis of socialist democracy, internal party democracy, "class independence" for the workers movement in relation to capitalist organizations and political programs, and so on). But this "baggage" was part and parcel of the history and activist reality of the FI and we received it (for better and sometimes for worse) more in a cultural than a doctrinal manner ; and this fit in very nicely with the type of organization that we were : activist, empirical and shaped by the conditions of clandestine work.

For better in that, for example, the FI culture provided ample space for developing our own ideas. This meant that while we closely read Trotsky's writings on the Spanish Revolution, we also read those of Andreu Nin and we had the good fortune to meet outstanding POUM militants such as Juan Andrade, María Teresa García Banús, Antonio Rodríguez, Enrique Rodríguez and Emma Roca. As such, we developed a very critical view of relations between Trotsky and the POUM and came to see the POUM as "our party" in the civil war. While these ideas generated debates in the FI, we were not censured in any way whatsoever.

The culture I am describing also developed through experience. For example, a small underground organization needed many types of political and material solidarity. The FI, and the French LCR in particular, never failed us. In addition to being a principle, solidarity is also something that has to be learned ; and the FI was a good school for this.

Regrettably, however, this culture was also steeped in a variety of sectarian and doctrinaire myths and habits. These myths and habits were unavoidable given the way the FI's tiny groups had swum against the current over a prolonged period of time, and each day endured the tension between the belief of being in possession of the "revolutionary program" and the material reality of the current's scant activist forces. One of these habits, which exacted a heavy tribute during the Liga's early years, was the tendency to immediately equate disagreement about a short-term concrete matter with a break from "principles".

As a result, all through 1972 a necessary debate — and one could even say a "natural" one given the times, especially in a new revolutionary organization with a largely student membership — about what approach to adopt toward the Comisiones Obreras trade-union confederation (CC OO) degenerated into a dispute over doctrine. First it became a debate about whether the political consciousness of the working class progresses only through united mobilization ; or if it does so primarily through experiences of radical action, in which revolutionaries necessarily play a significant role. This debate prompted different political orientations. On the one hand was a propaganda strategy in favour of the "united front of working-class organizations" ; on the other, a policy of initiatives by the revolutionary organization aimed at building the biggest actions possible in order to overwhelm "reformist" control of the movement. In the end, the debate hardened into a supposed programmatic disagreement about the "unity of the working class" ; and this, of course, led to a split.

Initially, the debate made perfect sense and was part of the Liga's process of maturing. Unfortunately, though, the FI was unable or unwilling to use its influence to prevent the debate from taking such a clumsy turn and ending so badly. So the Liga went through six years during which it

was divided into two separate organizations, the LCR and the LC, which then reunited in 1978. I use the name “Liga” to refer to both organizations ; this is a kind of belated “sign of penitence” for the mistake we made back then.

The LCR and LC had serious differences during the years of separation, but they continued to share a great deal of the original common culture. As such, in spite of ongoing disagreements and different personal affinities, the reunification of the two groups was genuine and lasting. While some sparks flared during the first few months, afterwards a member’s earlier affiliation was never mentioned, except perhaps as material for an occasional joke.

III

The LCR was able to rebound from the split with LC thanks to the fact that soon afterwards it merged with ETA VI (the majority current at ETA’s Sixth Assembly), which joined the FI after drawing a critical and self-critical balance sheet of their organization’s nationalism and military strategy.

This unification with ETA VI is very important in the history of the Liga for a number of reasons. First, it brought in members with different and broader experience, better established in factories — and in the prisons. Comrades in the prisons played a major political and moral role in the organization, and the ETA VI comrades made a vital contribution in this regard.

What’s more, the unification confirmed one of the LCR’s ideas about building the revolutionary party, which until that point hadn’t been more than a wish — the idea of converging with, or to be more exact “winning to revolutionary Marxism”, parts of other left-wing organizations that broke with “reformism”. This idea breathed life into the possibility that a small organization like the LCR could acquire — within a period of time that we expected would be short — the strength and breadth of experience and knowledge required to challenge the “reformists” (i.e. the PCE) for leadership of the working-class movement. ETA was not a “working-class organization” but following the movement against the Burgos Trials in the late 1960s — which had been so central to the dynamic leading to the birth of the Liga — it became a key reference for the revolutionary Left, well beyond the borders of the Basque Country (Euskadi).

Certainly, the unification increased the FI’s political authority in our eyes, given that it had proven itself capable of winning over activist forces from other currents.

The unification worked well right away, without even the slightest problem. It all seemed so natural to us. Considering what happened later, though, I think it would have been useful to ask ourselves why it had all worked out so well.

To be sure, an essential point was that we shared the program of the FI. Another factor was the climate of trust and activist exhilaration at the time. But I think that the decisive factor was the way we identified with the activist culture, party-building project and “way of doing politics” that a substantial part of the ETA VI leadership (exiled in France) had experienced and practised in their relations with the French LCR.

We symbolically demonstrated the unification’s importance to us by adopting the name LCR-ETA VI, under which we operated throughout the entire Spanish State until August 1976. We didn’t give a second thought to the problems this name could create for us, especially outside Euskadi. It was an ultra-Left show of pride : “This is who we are.” And we never regretted it.

IV

The FI didn't claim to "lead" the Liga and never interfered in any of its debates. Respect for the operations of each of its "sections" was an organizational principle that the FI leadership didn't always observe (Bensaïd cites some examples in his book), but it did so scrupulously in the case of the Liga for its entire history. That being the case, it is certainly true that some documents — especially "El crepúsculo del franquismo" ("Francoism's twilight years"), which we read just before the organization was founded — were decisively important during the first phase of the Liga, and particularly when it came to the LCR's political orientation under Francoism. [1]

The essay asks readers to understand reality and not to mould it around an ideology. There is not a single quotation from the "classics", except for the reference to organization of a "Leninist type" — no doubt aimed specifically to connect with the aspirations of those involved in preparations to found the Liga.

Most of the essay is devoted to analyzing the Spanish reality, its political and economic contradictions and its fundamental social conflicts. Re-reading it today, it retains many valuable ideas alongside brash projections (for example, regarding the "deflation" of "reformist and 'liberalizing' balloons"). It also speaks of the lessons that "Spanish workers" are meant to have drawn from the experiences of 1969-1970 (from resistance against the state of exception to struggles for amnesty at the time of the Burgos Trial) ; and of the model of "dual power" as the "natural" outcome of self-organization.

But what really merits our attention is the sentence summarizing the strategy set out in the essay. "The Franco dictatorship cannot be metamorphosed into a bourgeois democracy merely through pressure from the masses. Rather, it has to be overthrown by revolutionary direct mass action." The Revolutionary General Strike (RGS) was the LCR's formula for summarizing this idea, which guided our political work until the middle of 1976.

As a guide for action, the RGS was ultra-left — but also realistic and rational. Realistic and rational because it was based upon the process of mobilization initiated in the late 1960s by the struggles against the Burgos Trials and which continued through a number of local general strikes. The basis of our politics was to respect the real dynamic, to try to understand it through democratic debate, and to fight to broaden and amplify it through militant action. But also ultra-left, in a way that requires a brief explanation to distinguish it from sectarian variations.

Revolutionary politics are based upon goals determined by the struggle against capitalism as an overall system. They are about making what is "necessary, possible". To this end, it's essential to examine one feature of a given concrete situation that is not included in positivist (usually called "realistic") approaches : the mass movement's potential for development, which only exists in a fragmentary and embryonic manner within the dynamic of the real movement, but which can widen and spread. The central task for a revolutionary organization is to tease out and develop these potentialities within the real movement. In this sense, the revolutionary perspective is not "ultra-left" but rather "on the left of what is possible".

The ultra-leftism of the LCR lay in exaggerating the weight of these potentialities, and focussing all our work on the most advanced experiences and vanguard sectors, guided by the belief that the objective dynamic of struggle would naturally push the entire movement in this direction. To be sure, errors were made. But we did not pick the wrong fight.

Our starting point was to consider what goals had to be reached in order to overthrow Francoism. [2] We summarized these goals as constituting a radical purge of the state apparatus and all its political and economic institutions ; and especially of its repressive forces.

Who was going to carry this out, and how ? This was the second essential question. Our answer combined an analysis of the fundamental social conflicts (which class has reached such a degree of social and political conflict with the dictatorship that it is in a position to radically finish it off ?) with an assessment of the actual conditions of the social movement.

The RGS incorporated a third essential point : the overthrow of the dictatorship and the “winning of democracy” would put the struggle for extending self-organization front and centre. This meant building the economic, political and military bodies that would form the basis of the new emerging power. It meant incursions by the workers movement into capitalist property relations, leading to socialist revolution. When the Portuguese dictatorship fell in April 1974, the dynamic taken by the people’s movement confirmed that this potential for development did indeed exist, and in our favour.

The Portuguese events encouraged the “enlightened” wing of the Francoist apparatus and the “democratic opposition” — and corresponding governments and institutions internationally — enter the fray to prevent similar events from unfolding in Spain. For these forces, it was essential to avoid a collapse of the state and to assert government control over the now unavoidable process of political change. This was the logic of what was ultimately called “reform” and was the political orientation to which the “democratic opposition” subordinated itself right up until the end of the Transition.

We, on the other hand, restated our conviction that we were fighting for attainable goals. And we were. But the evolution of the situation all through 1975 and in the first months of 1976 persuaded us that the struggle should be focussed on a “break” with Francoism based on radical democratic goals (amnesty, republic, self-determination, dissolution of Franco’s repressive forces, and so forth) and basic social and economic demands. We argued that these goals could only be reached through widespread mass mobilization, which we called the Political General Strike (PGS).

Our fundamental differences with the forces of the “democratic opposition” were not a reflection of “maximalist” positions. They were based on the tasks and objectives that were required to genuinely bring an end to Francoism. The relationship of forces between the “Democratic Coordination” and us was tremendously lopsided, and it could be argued that we were doomed to failure. But we waged the fight that we had to.

Nicolás Sartorius and Javier Alfaya have argued that, “The transition occurred through an agreement with the ‘evolutionist’ wing of the regime for the simple reason that the opposition was never strong enough to overthrow the dictatorship and bring about a political revolution that would clean out and purge the state.” [3]

In fact, what really happened can be described by switching around the order of their sentences : “The opposition was never strong enough to overthrow the dictatorship and bring about a political revolution that would clean out and purge the state, for the simple reason that the transition occurred through an agreement with the ‘evolutionist’ wing of the regime.”

VI

The approval of the Constitution in the referendum of December 1978 confirmed the triumph of the “reform” initiated two years earlier by the Suárez government and agreed upon by all the forces in parliament except for the Basque National Party (PNV). It’s also worth recalling that Francisco Letamendia voted against the Constitution in Parliament ; as did Juan María Bandrés and Luis María Xirinacs in the Senate ; their vote was the Liga’s vote, too.

This triumph signalled a political defeat for the project of a “break” with Francoism and for the political and social movement that had fought for it. We weren’t prepared to deal with a defeat of this nature.

Indeed, it wasn’t that the mobilization had run aground or collapsed. During the first four months of 1979, there were nearly four million strike days ; in 1978, with the Moncloa Accords already in force, 3.6 million workers conducted a total of 18 million strike days. [4] While the Moncloa Accords had not brought an end to workers’ fighting spirit, they did derail the process of mass politicization that had followed the fall of the dictatorship. And this derailment left the way wide open for mass unemployment to demobilize most of the working-class movement in the subsequent period.

Even in such conditions, the women’s movement grew substantially ; there was significant trade-union activity, with the CC OO left-wing playing an important role (in December 1977, a Liga trade-union conference gathered more than 2,000 labour activists in Madrid) ; and on the level of local issues there was a vibrant movement, still untouched by the subsequent process of co-optation by municipal governments. We also had to deal with very harsh repression, police and fascist crimes (such as the murder of Germán Rodríguez in Sanfermines) — in response to which impressive solidarity initiatives were mounted. But this social combativeness did not crystallize into political consciousness and organization ; we were unable to make the link between the two.

Crucially, for the first time we directly experienced something that only seems easy to understand when you read about it in books. We lived through the process by which relations between social forces are initially supplanted by the institutions of parliamentary democracy, and then subordinated to them — and in particular, by the social and political institutions of the Left. Following the Moncloa Accords, the social-democratic PSOE and the PCE devoted a great deal of energy and underhanded methods to marginalizing organizations that were on their left. Though they were only partly successful, they certainly made things very difficult for us.

VII

If you want to build a revolutionary organization, you have to understand the difference between defeat and failure. Defeat can be, and frequently is, the outcome of a necessary struggle ; the task then becomes one of knowing how to keep on going. Failure occurs when you’ve determined that the struggle was either a mistake or no longer has meaning ; the usual consequence of this is demoralization and renunciation.

The consolidation of the “reform” was a defeat. But many comrades experienced it as a failure. In 1979 all the revolutionary organizations underwent a political crisis that, one year later, swept away the two largest among them, the PTE and the ORT. The Movimiento Comunista (MC) and the Liga survived, but not without suffering a huge drop in membership. In many cases, to paraphrase Mayakovsky, “the ship of the revolution smashed up on the rocks of everyday life.”

This was the period of greatest disorientation for the Liga. There was serious political confusion in the FI as well (which Bensaïd refers to at the end of chapter 7). There was reciprocal negative feedback around a line of workerist propaganda, particularly ill-suited to the actual situation in Spain.

The greatest demonstration of this confusion was the March 1979 election campaign in which we ran on calls for a “government of workers parties” that would implement policies against “accords and consensus”. It was an utterly abstract and doctrinaire line, as removed from reality as it was from the Liga’s way of doing politics. Fortunately, it had nothing to do with our daily activist commitment, dedicated to action and rooted in real movements.

The truth is that we didn’t really know what to do. The only thing that was clear to us was the need to persevere.

VIII

This state of affairs was aggravated by the only failed merger in the Liga’s history. In April 1979, a 300-strong group of militants from the Bolshevik Faction current of the FI joined the Liga. They were coming out of an “entryist” operation in the PSOE and the UGT trade-union federation. We had never done “entryism” and had a very critical view of this type of practice ; but the FI had its heart set on the “unification of Trotskyists” and we thought that these comrades would be integrated into the organization without any difficulty.

In fact, the grouping had actually joined the Liga as a continuation of its “entryist” operation. In an organization like the Liga, which was very respectful of the democratic rights of minority currents and worked on the assumption of members’ loyalty to one another and to the organization, this operation had devastating effects. At a time that was in any case very difficult for activist work, we spent months wading through a nightmare of internal manoeuvring in various parts of the organization. When it was over, we were wounded but fully immunized against mergers based on supposed “Trotskyist programmatic agreements”.

I think our political confidence in the FI was also shaken by this episode. In the new phase of the Liga’s life that was initiated in the early 1980s, we carried out party-building work at a greater remove from the International.

IX

The Nicaraguan Revolution gave rise to the hope that a new phase of worldwide struggles had begun. But these hopes were quickly dashed ; the onslaught of neoliberal capitalism began in 1980 under Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher’s leadership and routed its opponents in less than a decade.

These were extraordinarily turbulent and harsh times, in our country as well. Following the stir created by Antonio Tejero’s failed coup attempt in February 1981, Felipe González’s PSOE came to power on a wave of hope for change that was quickly transformed into an approach that laid the groundwork for social-liberalism. It pursued government economic policies at the service of “capitalist modernization” and “industrial redeployment”, alongside a program of membership in NATO and the European Community, privatization, the get-rich-quick culture, the GAL death squads, and on and on.

We could no longer measure success in terms of social and political gains, but by the ability to resist and to avoid capitulation. “Insumisión” was not only the name of a social movement ; it was also the defining feature of the politics and moral stance of what we in those days called “active sectors” – the social and political Left. The Liga undertook a thoroughgoing reorientation, beginning at the time of initial debates around the “Party of Revolutionaries” paradigm in late 1979. The outcome of these discussions was the merger with Movimiento Comunista (MC) in November 1991.

It’s well known that this merger ended disastrously just a few months later. As a result, there’s a danger of assessing the “long decade” that preceded this solely on the basis of the final outcome and of seeing the history of these years as nothing more than a logical precursor to this fatal conclusion — inexorably gathering strength from one experience to the next. Such an approach would not do justice to the real historical record and to the work of comrades during this period ; and would especially be a tremendous waste of very valuable ideas and experiences. To be sure, the latter should be appraised with a critical eye, but in my opinion they remain an attempt to build a revolutionary organization in decidedly non-revolutionary circumstances. They deserve to be disseminated, appreciated and perhaps even used today by activists in the alternative Left.

Without a collectively produced documentation of the Liga’s history, my feeling is that it’s extremely difficult to come up with a personal opinion about this period, even when allotted a lot of space to do so. To do so in a few paragraphs takes a lot of gumption, and the most one can hope for is not to fall on one’s face. But given the topic of this essay, it looks like I’ll have to take the plunge. It wouldn’t be credible to write about “the Trotskyism of the Liga” and rush through the most complicated part of this history with a trite sentence or two. With this in mind, I’ll wrap up with some very brief notes on four different questions, each one of a very different nature than the other, that I consider to have played a major role during the events of this period. First, the “Party of Revolutionaries” paradigm ; second, politics in the new social movements ; third, the LKI’s decision to breakaway to create a “sovereign national party” in Euskadi ; and fourth, our relations with MC.

1. The “Party of Revolutionaries” orientation started coming together in late 1979 and represented a change in the direction and political project of the Liga, particularly with respect to its perception of its own role in the building of a revolutionary organization. The change can be summarized in the following way : the revolutionary party had to be built under one roof by revolutionary currents with different ideological viewpoints and historical assessments but who agreed on the “main tasks” of revolutionary politics. The democratic character of the organization would ensure a pluralist debate, through the course of which more extensive agreement could be reached in the medium to long term about strategic and programmatic matters ; or in the absence of such agreement, it would guarantee a harmonious relationship between different points of view.

In part, the “Party of Revolutionaries” orientation was a reaction to the disaster of the “unification of the Trotskyist movement” that we had lived through in the previous phase. But only in part. In fact, “Trotskyist unity” had been something of a detour away from the LCR’s original trajectory and the “unity of revolutionaries” was as much about getting back on this track, with the appropriate readjustments for the changed context.

The main — and most problematic — novelty was the downplaying of the “ideology and historical assessments” (a rather ambiguous notion to begin with) of revolutionary organizations. For an organization like the LCR, for whom “historical continuity” was part of its identity and activist commitment, such an approach could spill over onto matters of political substance.

Initially, this approach only applied to the conditions required for contemplating mergers with other revolutionary organizations. But over time its scope grew wider and wider. For example, this was the way the Liga’s position was explained in a December 1985 “open letter” to the Mientras Tanto

journal : “As a consequence of the crisis of the Left, we are living through a period where far too many forces speak of alternative visions and grand overall projects, while waiting around for a great flash of light to show us the way out of the labyrinth. We have ceased to believe in such things. It is only with reference to practical matters that we’ll be able to find common ground for work between different revolutionary currents. And it is solely on the basis of this common work that we can build solid programmatic agreements, which should be in no hurry to address matters unrelated to our own concrete experience.” [5]

The phrase “we have ceased to believe in such things” can be interpreted in many ways, but even the most broad-minded interpretation would point to a clear distancing from the organization’s “political baggage”. Moreover, the quotation is an outright assertion of pragmatism, which appears to set the bar very low for the level of “programmatic agreement” required to undertake the building of a common organization.

The Liga had long internal and public debates about this orientation, and you will come across all manner of formulations depending on who was writing and when. In my opinion, though, there was something we all shared ; and this had to do with a problem that affected the entire revolutionary Left from the 1980s onwards and around which some headway has only very recently been made. Bensaïd calls it the “eclipse of strategic reasoning”. I think the “Party of Revolutionaries” paradigm meant a project of building a revolutionary organization without strategy, based on the argument that the latter would be developed at some undefined future stage within the common organization. The substance of the organization would be the initiatives it took and agreements reached around these initiatives. It was a weak project that didn’t come across as such because the LCR injected a huge dose of activism into it, fighting day-to-day and little-by-little to promote the organization and earn its place in the political landscape – a place that was always useful, and in many cases essential, for resistance struggles, particularly among newly active young people.

2. By this point, the politics of the “new social movements” had become the basis for the politics and even the very existence of the LCR. There were plenty of reasons for this. Indeed, the women’s movement, environmentalism, pacifism, and anti-militarism as such and within the anti-NATO movement, were the engine and outward expression for social and political resistance. These movements encouraged the questioning of Left traditions and gave voice to new problems and ideas. The workers movement had been weakened socially by unemployment, and politically by the institutionalization of the hegemonic trade unions and the professionalization of the trade-union activists who had led the struggle against Francoism. It was no longer a reference point, especially following the defeat of the struggles against industrial redeployment. The trade-union Left and a number of radical struggles, however isolated, were labour’s main contribution to the movement of resistance.

The Liga spent all of its energy on building these movements and was always attentive and open to the ideas that they produced. Some of the most interesting documents in the history of the organization were written at this time and they bear re-reading today. [6]

It was natural and healthy that this effervescence of new ideas and experiences should shake up the Liga’s political foundations. In my view, the doubts and questions were not the problem ; nor were the revisions we carried out alongside the embrace of new ideas based on empathy for the movements — occasionally without sufficient reflection. The problem was certainly not this effort we made to change, but rather the way this change was combined with what needed to be “preserved”, within the requisite process of self-examination about our political tradition. I put the word “preserve” in quotation marks because this shouldn’t be understood as the entrenching of a supposed orthodoxy, which would have turned us into a sect, especially in the conditions prevailing at the time. Here “preserve” means studying and debating the organization and the FI’s baggage

with an “environmentalist” outlook — saving everything that still had life in it and recycling whenever possible. In other words, avoiding the pressure to “start from scratch”. Indeed, “one always starts over from the middle”, as Gilles Deleuze said, a phrase that Daniel Bensaid frequently quoted.

To be sure, we paid a great deal of attention to educational activities, which were based on the Marxism of our current ; but I think that these activities were carried out at quite a distance from activist work. And in those days activism was everything. This imbalance had a particular impact on our understanding of the role of a revolutionary political organization in the social movements. Our comrades were active as loyal organizers for the different movements. They often had significant responsibilities within them and varying degrees of authority and readiness to suggest initiatives and take up the tasks required to carry them out. But what was the purpose of a revolutionary political organization for social movements, beyond its usefulness around immediate practical matters and the resources that it could contribute ? The tensions between the “social” and the “political”, along with the need to create “new ways of doing politics”, began to appear in the full light of day. I don’t think we were up to the challenge. Twenty years later these questions remain very complex and confused, perhaps the main theoretical and practical challenge for the alternative Left.

3. In 1989 the LCR organizations in Euskadi and Catalonia established themselves as independent and sovereign parties — maintaining shared leadership bodies with the LCR, and allowing for regular attendance by LCR delegations at the new parties’ leadership and public meetings. The political arguments behind these decisions had to do with important changes — in particular with a profound rethinking of the national question that included support for independence ; but also with the “national” character of the two organizations. Whatever one may think of these arguments and the organizational decisions that they entailed, it was clear that the political situation and activities in Euskadi and Catalonia had specific characteristics that held sway over the work of the revolutionary Left there, particularly during a low ebb in the activity of the social and political Left on a Spanish State-wide level.

The overall balance sheet of these decisions is very complex and I have absolutely no intention of getting into it here. I would just like to highlight one point that had a big impact on the way things subsequently unfolded. The existence of Spanish State-wide common leadership bodies could have been interpreted as a friendly gesture in the realm of “external relations” or as an activist political commitment based on the high priority given to common present and future tasks. In the case of the LKI in Euskadi, I think it was only a gesture of friendship and material support, which actually reflected a weakening and depreciation of our shared political heritage. I think the LKI’s separation was widely experienced as a loss in the LCR. At the time, it’s probable that things could not have turned out otherwise. In spite of everything, our common heritage of history and ideas lived on ; and it’s possible that over time this could have brought us politically together once again. In the end, though, this was not to be.

4. Relations with MC had been a factor influencing Liga politics from the end of the 1970s onwards — with a few experiences of common work and many conflicts and disagreements. When we adopted the “Party of Revolutionaries” orientation, it was obvious that at some point or another we would have to explore the possibility of a merger with MC — an organization we crossed paths with in nearly every initiative and movement, within a complex pattern of cooperation and competition.

Beginning in 1985, and with fits and starts, merger with MC was the focal point of the LCR’s activities. The process began in 1985, but only concluded six years later. So while the LCR can be criticized on many fronts, improvisation is not one of them ! And any serious analysis of the process involves a lot of work remembering and rethinking what happened, re-reading the extensive

documents, and relating the merger process to the events of the “international disorder” that characterized those years. It is worth pointing out one feature of this experience : the goal of a merger in fact ended up becoming the main political content of the merger ; and this is actually why the merger could take place.

During most of the six-year unification process, the method employed was in line with the main points of the original “Party of Revolutionaries” orientation. This meant increasing mutual knowledge about the two organizations and their respective ideological and theoretical evolution ; strengthening agreements through action ; and openly debating in search of an agreement around “central tasks” for building a revolutionary political organization. Generally speaking, relations between the two organizations improved over time ; we had a high level of agreement around matters of everyday politics but debates on deeper questions brought out major disagreements. At the beginning of the 1990s, there was tremendous pressure to merge from a majority of Liga members. Disagreements around the “central tasks” had in fact become not only an obstacle ; they had become “the” obstacle. Were these disagreements really as important as we seemed to think they were ?

To try to understand the situation, I think one has to recall the international context at the time. The Berlin Wall had just collapsed. There were hopes that the crisis of the bureaucracies would give rise to anti-capitalist movements capable of carrying out a “political revolution” and resuming the building of socialism, but they faded within a few short months. In fact, for the FI these weren’t dreams, illusions or predictions (at the time we said, “we got the forecast wrong but the diagnosis right,” which was a very clever way to get around the problem) ; rather, they were the very core that gave meaning to its struggle. It was the end of an era. “We have lost our certainties and only hope remains.” These words written many years before by Ernst Bloch now sounded prophetic.

It was in such a context that a radical change in focus for the merger occurred in Euskadi. “Bringing the two parties together before debating the differences contained in each party’s ‘baggage’, is an achievement that will enable us to build a common heritage.” [7] This was the first sign of what I referred to earlier as the conversion of the merger itself into the “fundamental political content” of said merger. This organizational dynamic took off and culminated in the unification of the two organizations in March 1991.

It goes without saying that what was seen as the success of the “Basque method” played a part in getting the LCR and MC to resume their merger process along similar lines. But our decision was the result of specific thinking and discussions which, moreover, prompted changes with respect to the Basque approach. For one thing, there was a debate whose aim was to reach mutually satisfactory resolutions around substantive political and organizational matters.

Likewise, there was a debate on one of the most difficult conditions of the merger, withdrawal from the Fourth International, and a formal explanation was drafted on this question. We wrote that, “withdrawal does not mean that we have changed our understanding of internationalism or that we no longer value the Fourth International. Were it not for the merger with MC, we would retain our membership in the FI.” [8] What is more, the unified organization made a commitment to maintain “regular relations” with the FI, which would be a contribution – a “challenge”, we said – to the regroupment policy adopted by the 12th World Congress.

We certainly believed all of this. But the MC’s had no interest whatsoever in anything to do with the FI. And I think that for a great many LCR members the programmatic reasons for FI membership belonged more to the past than to the present.

What mattered in the present — and created hope for the future — was the merger. This mood was

front and centre at the spectacular unification congress in November 1991 at the Madrid Convention Centre, with 1700 enthusiastic members in attendance. The congress marked the end of the Liga's history.

A few months later, everything collapsed. The unified organization was a destructive and sterile experience. Not a single interesting or positive idea, initiative, experience or publication remains. Absolutely nothing, save for a question : why ?

Finding answers to this question is a difficult task. It not only requires re-reading, re-thinking and reviving memories ; it also requires talking to people, comparing and contrasting opinions, finding common ground and agreeing to disagree.

Difficult, but necessary. I think it's a debt we owe to ourselves – those of us who made this history and should know how to end it as a chapter in the fight for revolution, that will be followed by new chapters. It's a debt we owe to those in the FI who in those years accompanied us from outside our country, with a degree of affection and respect for the Liga that is still impressive today. These FI comrades still ask themselves — and ask us — what happened. And it's a debt we owe to those young comrades who feel that the years of the Liga also belong to them.

To be continued...

Miguel Romero

P.-S.

- International Viewpoint, 4 March 2013 :
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2912>
 - Translation : Nathan Rao.
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Notes

[1] This essay was written by Ernest Mandel and was published as an editorial in the January 1971 issue of the French-language *Quatrième Internationale* journal. The Spanish-language *Viento Sur* journal reprinted the piece in the January 2006 issue, which can be found on its website www.vientosur.info. My comments here are based on the 2006 introduction I wrote for *Viento Sur*.

[2] I wrote a piece entitled “La razón izquierdista” (“Ultra-left reasoning”) for the December 2000 issue of *Viento Sur*. My remarks here are based on this article.

[3] Sartorius, N y Alfaya, J (1999). *La memoria insumisa*, Madrid, Espasa, p. 169.

[4] Setién, J. (2000). “Movimiento obrero y transición” in *Viento Sur* nº 54, p. 75.

[5] Romero, M (1985). “Carta a la redacción de Mientras Tanto”. *Inprecor* nº 46.

[6] Among others, Resolución sobre el feminismo (“Resolution on feminism”), Eighth Congress of the LCR (1989). “Crítica de la energía nuclear y alternativas energéticas” (“A critique of nuclear energy, and energy alternatives”), Prat, E., *Inprecor* nº 79 (1990). “Los nuevos movimientos sociales y la acción política” (“The new social movements and political action”), Pastor, J. *Inprecor* nº 84 (1991).

[7] “Informe sobre las relaciones EMK-LKI” (“Report on relations between the EMK and LKI”), LKI National Committee, 19 May 1990.

[8] “Internacionalismo e internacional en el proyecto de unificación con el MC” (“Internationalism and International in the LCR-MC unification project”), LCR Central Committee, 9 December 1990.