

## Wilebaldo Solano, 1916-2010

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WILEBALDO SOLANO, THE last member of the original leadership of the Partit Obrer d'Unificació Marxista (POUM — Workers' Party of Marxist Unification), died in Barcelona on September 7, 2010, at 94. As an anti-Stalinist communist party, the POUM helped lead the Spanish Revolution of 1936.

Solano had been named the party's secretary-general in 1947, while an émigré in France. Most POUM members inside Spain had joined the clandestine Socialist Party of Catalunya (PSC) in the aftermath of the Second World War. With the PSC's achievement of political dominance on the left in Catalunya, following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, the legacy of the POUM was recognized in political and academic institutions and monuments. The "official" POUM, of which Solano was an active, inspired and capable representative until his death, emerged from the Franco era as a small remnant of the historic party.

Solano was born in 1916 in the city of Burgos, in Castilla la Vieja, but was taken as a child to Barcelona. He had come to the POUM at 19, when it was created in 1935. Solano was a university medical student under the distinguished Catalan physicians Josep Trueta and August Pi i Sunyer, and was active in the Association of Revolutionary Students of Barcelona. He was a member of the larger of the two POUM founding groups, the Bloc Obrer i Camperol (BOC — Workers' and Peasants' Bloc), led by Joaquim Maurín (1896-1972).

The smaller constituent of the new party was the Esquerra Comunista Espanyola (EC) or Spanish Communist Left, a Trotskyist organization led by the Catalan teacher, labor leader, literary critic and translator Andreu Nin (1892-1937). Unlike Nin's group, Maurín's was not supportive of Trotsky's positions, although Maurín was opposed to the Stalinist line of the Communist International (CI) after 1930.

Both Maurín and Nin, however, had been significant figures in the leadership of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), the massive anarchosyndicalist labor movement that dominated Catalan working-class culture. They had also been outstanding participants in the formation of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) as a section of the CI, after the Bolshevik Revolution. When Nin, who lived in Russia until 1930, and Maurín, then temporarily exiled in France, repudiated the Stalinization of the PCE, they took most of the distinguished pioneers of Spanish Communism with them out of the official apparatus into the BOC and the Communist Left.

Solano joined the BOC in 1932 and quickly became a frequent contributor to the Bloc's newspapers, La Batalla and Adelante. With the foundation of the POUM, he served in the party's executive committee. Maurín had been caught behind enemy lines at the beginning of the civil war in July 1936, and Nin was left as the main POUM leader. Solano became general secretary of the POUM youth, the Joventut Comunista Ibèrica (JCI — Iberian Communist Youth) and editor of the newspaper Juventud Comunista, in September 1936. Solano worked closely with Nin until the kidnapping and murder of the latter by Soviet agents in June 1937.

As a major factor in the development of a revolutionary pole in the Catalan workers' movement, the POUM youth (JCI), led by Solano, in February 1937 formed a Revolutionary Youth Front (Frente de las Juventudes Revolucionarias) with the Libertarian Youth (Juventudes Libertarias), the large, active

and widely-organized youth branch of the anarcho-syndicalist movement.

The POUM had attracted the rage of Stalin and his clique by their forthright denunciation of the fake trials of old Bolsheviks in Moscow, as well as by the party's defense of revolutionary militancy in the Spanish conflict. In May 1937, with the civil war raging, Soviet agents in Barcelona carried out a provocation against the anarchosyndicalist and socialist union members who jointly administered the city telephone exchange, by sending Stalinist-controlled police units to occupy the main telephone building. News of this act, considered by the Barcelona workers as counter-revolutionary, stimulated a city-wide strike and insurrection, with the CNT and POUM on one side and the Stalinists on the other.

Although Catalan nationalist politicians were viewed by some outsiders as allies of the Stalinists, they remained independent of them and in most respects tilted toward the CNT. The "May events" produced a crisis in the Catalan revolutionary and the Spanish Republican governments. The main victim of this would be the weakest of the radical protagonists, the POUM. A month after the conclusion of the "May events" and "restoration of order" in Barcelona, the POUM was banned, Nin was abducted, and much of the remainder of the party's top leadership was arrested.

The POUM was defamed in Spain and internationally as alleged Francoist agents, but the Spanish Republican judiciary, while holding the party's leadership culpable of involvement in the "May events," refused to accede to Soviet demands that the POUM be found guilty of high treason and espionage. Solano evaded capture in the June 1937 repression and continued working in the POUM executive committee, while directing its now clandestine youth bulletin, *Juventud Obrera*. He was arrested in April 1938. The Stalinists' intention was to have him be charged as a defendant in a second POUM trial, which did not take place.

At the fall of the Spanish republic in 1939, Solano fled to France, where he was arrested in 1941 by the German-collaborationist Vichy authorities and sentenced to 20 years' forced labor. He was liberated by Resistance fighters in July 1944 from the fortress-prison of Eysses.

Solano was among only 33 prisoners saved from a mass deportation by the Nazis of 1,200 internees to Germany, because of his four years' medical training, assiduous reading of French and Spanish medical journals, and use to the prison doctor as an assistant. Once freed, he helped found a combat group that rescued other prisoners of the Germans and their collaborators in France. At least one individual, the POUM leader Juan Andrade, had to be saved both from prison and from murder by a Stalinist death squad.

After World War II Solano was active in reconstituting the POUM "external section" in France, serving as editor of *La Batalla* in exile, as well as party secretary-general. The émigré edition of *La Batalla* was considered one of the best periodicals of the anti-Franco refugee community and was widely distributed illegally in Spain as well as in France, Latin America, and North Africa.

During the 1960s Solano established a new "POUM left" periodical in Paris, *Tribuna Socialista*, to distinguish those faithful to the party's original legacy from their comrades who had joined the Spanish Socialists. The main task to which he dedicated himself after the end of Francoism was the establishment and maintenance of the Fundación Andreu Nin, at [www.fundanin.org](http://www.fundanin.org), which has become a central institution of Catalan historical memory. He was a kind, helpful and encouraging source to many historians who visited him or solicited his assistance.

At an event honoring Nin, held in the Virreina Palace on the Ramblas in Barcelona (which during the Revolution had been the headquarters of the POUM and the place from which Andreu Nin was kidnapped) on June 16, 2007, Solano commented accurately, 70 years after Nin's disappearance:

“Some historians have permitted themselves the privilege of claiming that the POUM was destroyed. But they were wrong... The trial that the [KGB] tried to carry out in Barcelona failed. The campaign of calumnies and repression against the POUM failed. And nobody could prevent the POUM from continuing its work on the war fronts, in factories and in the prisons, with the banner of struggle against fascism and for revolutionary socialism.”

Wilebaldo Solano was a valiant defender of historical truth. His published works include, in English, *The Spanish Revolution: The Life of Andrés Nin*, issued by the Independent Labour Party in Britain in 1973.

**J. Martorell**

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