José Díaz Fernández

Red October in Asturias

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Introduction

On October 4, 1934, thousands of Spanish workers went on a strike that has been considered by many as one of the key events that led to the Spanish Civil War. The general strike had been called by the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and its trade union, the General Workers Union (UGT). The strike had also received lukewarm support from the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) and the anarchist trade union (CNT/FAI) which competed with the PSOE for the workers' vote. The strike was motivated by the victory of the conservatives in the 1933 national elections which had made possible the centrist government of Alejandro Lerroux's Radical Republican Party (PRR) with the support of the Confederation of Autonomous Right Parties (CEDA). When the CEDA withdrew its support from the PRR, demanding to bring its own leaders into the government, the left feared that the ascent to power of the Catholic right would endanger the Spanish Second Republic instituted in 1931. This fear was justified by the blatant disregard for democracy that José María Gil Robles, president of the CEDA, had expressed throughout the electoral campaign. In one of the political rallies held that year, Gil Robles had said: "Democracy is not an end for us, but a means to conquer the State. When the time comes, Parliament should submit to our will or we will make it disappear" (Elorza, 203).

However, the success of the strike throughout Spain was uneven. It was strongly supported in Asturias and

Catalonia where the workers were well organized and armed, but only partially successful in areas like Madrid, Andalusia, and Aragón and even less so in the rest of Spain. The memory of the repression of the June 1934 peasant strike and the lack of leaders to help radicalize the strike into an open confrontation with the government contributed to its demise.

The original proposal to form a leftist platform was the initiative of the Workers and Peasants Block (BOC), a small Catalan Marxist party. The proposal gained pace after the 1933 conservative victory in the general elections. The Workers Alliance against Fascism, as the leftist platform was initially known, was opposed by the Catalan Communist Party and the Catalan section of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT. After offering its support to the Workers Alliance, the Socialist Catalan Union (USC) abandoned it to side with the Catalan Republican Party (ERC). This further debilitated the Alliance since the Catalan PSOE and the other parties that supported it had only a limited following in Catalonia. As the Workers Alliance initiative declined in Catalonia, Francisco Largo Caballero, leader of the PSOE, rescued the project of a workers alliance in an attempt to move away from the traditional reformist strategy of his party. The Workers Alliance was successfully organized in some areas of Madrid, Andalusia, and Asturias serving as the platform to promote the 1934 general strike.

The ultimate goal of the general strike was not clearly defined. In the two regions where the general strike gained momentum, the justifications associated to it presented important differences. Lluís Companys, president of the Catalan regional government (Generalitat), proclaimed the Catalan Federated State within what he described as the

Spanish Federal Republic on October 6. Companys was eventually detained by General Domingo Batet and an emergency regional government (the *Consell de la Generalitat*) with members of the traditionalist *Lliga Regionalista de Catalunya* as well as Lerroux's PRR was put in place.

In Asturias, the general strike was not associated to issues of national identity and contested sovereignty. The general strike here focused only on workers' rights and aimed to prevent the erosion of the benefits gained up to that point. Asturias was the region where the general strike was supported by the largest percentage of the workers and where it remained active for the longest time. The Asturian revolt continued days after workers in all other regions had resigned themselves to going back to work.

The general objective of the strike was vaguely defined from its inception. As historian Santos Juliá explains, the PSOE had two separate conceptions of revolution. The first conceived revolution as a reformist process in which the abdication of the king and the declaration of the Republic were seen as tools to bring about a socialist society. The second form of revolution was understood as a violent seizure of power that could be justified in the event that the spirit of the Republic was compromised by the conservative political parties (Juliá, 116-118). For many of the leaders of the PSOE, the October 1934 strike was intended to send a clear message to the CEDA: any attempt to derail the reformist agenda of the Spanish Second Republic would be met with the staunch opposition of the left. The leadership of the PSOE had anticipated an armed confrontation as a result of the general strike and prepared for it. Indalecio Prieto, socialist Minister of public works, ordered a purchase of arms from Portugal that were to arrive in Asturias

aboard the steamship Turquesa. The shipment was intercepted by the Spanish Civil Guard, but the miners had already been stockpiling weapons and stealing explosives from the mines. Despite all these preparations, the ultimate goal of the PSOE was, according to historian Adrian Shubert, to secure the success of the general strike (268). Andrés Saborit, secretary general of the PSOE, scolded the workers imprisoned at the Carcel Modelo in Oviedo saying: "Nobody ordered you to start the revolution. The order was for a strike" (qtd. in Solano Palacio, 46).

Unlike the political elites on the left who saw the victory of the conservative forces as a threat to the Republic, the bulk of the working class interpreted it as further proof that the Republic had already failed to deliver on its promises. Many among the rank and file of the PSOE, accordingly, understood the call to a general strike as a literal call to arms to bring about a socialist revolution. It was only in Asturias, however, that the revolutionary drive of the workers coincided with a concerted effort on the part of the regional trade unions, access to weapons, and, most importantly, a rapidly deteriorating economic situation that contributed to the radicalization of the miners.

The decline of the mining industry had increased exponentially with the arrival of the Spanish Second Republic. The Spanish coal market was protected by tariffs from the more competitively priced coal produced in Northern Europe. The large infrastructural works undertaken under the Primo de Rivera dictatorship in the 1920s had helped keep the industry afloat, but as the dictatorship came to an end and the Republic turned its attention to agrarian reform, coal prices plummeted and unemployment among miners grew at a rapid pace.

The revolutionary drive of the miners indicated not only a divide between the political elites and their political base, but also a generational divide among the miners. The Asturian Miners Union (SMA), which was part of the UGT, had traditionally followed the lead of the PSOE for moderate reformist actions. The leadership of the SMA had even complained about the lack of political engagement of the younger generation during the 1920s. Manuel Llaneza, leader, and founder of the SMA, had complained that the younger generation of miners:

> does not know nor want to know our history, does not understand nor want to understand that they have lived in an extremely unusual time, and that instead of dedicating itself to the conquest of knowledge to raise themselves from their condition of inferiority they let themselves be seduced by the glitter of a flame. (*El Socialista* 15 May 1922).

As the economic bonanza of the Primo de Rivera years came to an end, the younger generation that had not known the hardships of state repression in previous strikes, particularly the repression of the 1917 general strike, began demanding that the SMA adopt more aggressive positions. Many of the mining companies like the Mieres plant, the fourth largest producer in the region, went bankrupt. The mine owners demanded higher tariffs from the government and increased productivity with lower wages for the workers. As unemployment increased among workers and those that still had a job saw their acquisitive power rapidly decrease, the divide between the younger, radicalized miners and the older workers that often occupied positions of responsibility in the SMA increased. The miners' union demanded that the mining industry be nationalized and that the Spanish gov-

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Red October in Asturias

Prologue

The first thing of note for whomever dispassionately examines the Spanish October, rather we should say the Asturian October, as only in Asturias did a true armed uprising take place, is the lack of a supportive environment. Spanish society was not prepared for the inherent watchwords of the social revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat.[1] It lacked a favorable social climate; bourgeois defenses were not spent, neither was the State in decay. It was an enormous error by the socialists, who moved without transition from governmental collaborationism to class revolution.

Although many of the things I am going to say in this prologue are in the collective memory, I have little alternative but to repeat them. When on reflection the reader makes a comparison with the events of October, he will view them with greater clarity, given that historical events do not happen by spontaneous generation; they are always the consequence of previous events.

The first thing to recall of the political antecedents of

1 Díaz-Fernández's comments foreshadow Salvador Madariaga's argument in *España: ensayo de historia contemporánea* that the radicalization of the Socialist party, as well as the radicalization of the right, contributed to the downfall of the Spanish Second Republic. According to Madariaga's insightful reading, however, the problem of the Spanish Second Republic was not that the bourgeois State was not in decay, but rather that Spain had not managed to transition to a modern State. Although the Spanish Second Republic presented itself as a Republic of intellectuals, Madariaga was quite dismissive of the ability of Spanish intelligentsia to lead the country. In his response to Madariaga's book, Antonio Gramsci agreed that the role of Spanish intellectuals in the Spanish revolution was a highly idiosyncratic one.

the uprising is how they survived the change of regime. This was not the fruit of a triumphal revolution. Yes, there was the pressure of public opinion against the monarchy because the king above all, was blamed for the military dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. The conservative and neutral masses, who had initially sympathized with the dictatorship, due to antipathy with the same old political class, were alienated by the monarchy which, despite that extreme measure, was unable to resolve any of the national problems. Consequently, when after seven years of forced electoral abstention, the nation was consulted, it chose republican candidates.[2] One of the king's ministers noted the event in the following way, 'It's a country which went to bed a monarchy and awoke a republic.' My readers know that the provisional government, comprising three socialists, had prepared for the king's flight, and that King Alfonso[3] left Cartagena as a monarch who was withdrawing rather than abdicating. He apparently said, 'I

2 Díaz Fernández is referring here to the proclamation of the Spanish Second Republic after the Primo de Rivera dictatorship. The initial popularity enjoyed by the dictator, who was seen as a viable alternative to years of incompetent politicians, quickly dissipated at the end of the 1920s. The reasons that explain the demise of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship are complex and interrelated. The main one is the economic downturn that put an end to the infrastructure projects that the dictator had been undertaking during the first half of his regime. As James H. Rial explains, although unemployment figures did not begin to be collected until the end of the dictatorship and the data available only show modest increases in unemployment, it is more than likely that a considerable portion of the working population had entirely withdrawn from the workforce by 1930 which would explain why they did not show up in the statistics (229). Primo de Rivera lost the support of Catalan and Basque nationalists who were expecting him to decentralize the government. Industrialists and small business owners resented the active role that the UGT, the socialist union which had agreed to collaborate with the dictator, had attained under the regime.

3 The departure of Alfonso XIII surprised the conservative segments of Spanish society that had counted on him as a guarantor of the traditional order. The *Carlistas* pledged to bring down the Spanish Second Republic by force while others like the Catholic Church, attempted to co-opt the reformist attempts of the new government.

follow tradition.' It was the tradition of his grandmother and his great-grandmother who driven by their mistakes, also migrated to Paris; but without abdicating. It is known that left-wing politicians predominated in the government, nonetheless the most moderate men, Alcalá Zamora, Lerroux and Maura[4], were those who gave a conservative tone to the nascent republic.

To what is owed this preponderance of moderate forces which had to sustain themselves throughout the different Republican governments? It was without doubt, the peaceful origin of the Republic. The conservative classes which had distanced themselves from the monarchy looked favorably on the fact that at the head of the new regime was a wealthy, Andalusian landowner, and fiery parliamentarian, who at the time represented the counterrevolution. In Spain Bolshevism was greatly feared during that period. Besides, republicans known as 'the historic ones,' were discredited. They were to be found in monarchical politics in 'opposition to his majesty' and were publicly accused of meekly cohabiting with monarchist

4 Niceto Alcalá Zamora, president of the Second Spanish Republic between 1931 and 1936, and Miguel Maura, Minister of the Interior, were the founders of the Liberal Republican Right party, a group of moderate, Catholic, monarchists converted to Republicanism. Alcalá Zamora and Maura opposed the legislation that aimed to complete the separation of Church and State in Spain. They also complained vehemently against the anti-clerical riots that resulted in the burning of churches and monasteries after the proclamation of the Republic. Alejandro Lerroux gained popularity among the working classes for his campaigns against the governments of the Restoration. When the Primo de Rivera dictatorship came to power, the left wing of his party left to form the Radical Socialist Republican Party of which Díaz Fernández was also a member. Lerroux was the most visible figure of the emerging mass politics, the beginnings of which historian José Álvarez Junco, dates back to the end of the nineteenth century (vii). Lerroux's populist demagoguery gained him the nickname of the Emperor of the Paralelo (Barcelona's Theater district). Lerroux was elected president of the new conservative government that came to power in the 1933 elections.

politicians, without any great concern for the triumph of the Republic.

How did the socialists and left-wing republicans accommodate this conservative influence? They had little faith in the revolutionary capacity of the masses. Socialists, from Pablo Iglesias[5] down, responded to the tactic of reformist socialism. Largo Caballero,[6] later the leader of the revolution, had during the military dictatorship, even belonged, by order of the party, to a senior agency of the monarchical State, representing trade union power. And they were the first to be convinced of the inefficiency of the old republicanism, preferring the converts Alcalá Zamora and Maura, believing them to be more trustworthy. The truth is that they were constantly making protestations of their love for the proletariat, and of the need for major social reforms. The left-wing republicans,

5 Pablo Iglesias founded the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) in 1879 and *El Socialista* the magazine that became the main tool of communication for the new organization. Díaz Fernández's denunciation of the passive reformism that characterized the early years of the PSOE provides an insightful diagnosis of the limitations that would eventually become characteristic of its interactions with the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and of its role in the Second Spanish Republic. As Paul Kennedy explains, "[t]he PSOE's rhetorical radicalism belied the party's patent unsuitability for revolutionary activity" (23).

6 Francisco Largo Caballero was one of the leaders of the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and its trade union, the General Workers Union (UGT). He became the head of the party and its trade union in 1925 after the death of its founder Pablo Iglesias. Against the advice of Julián Besteiro, Secretary General of the PSOE, who believed that Spain should undergo a bourgeois revolution before socialists accepted positions in the Spanish government, Largo-Caballero went on to become the Minister of Labor Relations in the first governments of the Second Spanish Republic between 1931 and 1933. Unlike Besteiro, Largo-Caballero believed that collaboration with the bourgeois republican governments would help him defend the interests of the proletariat. As Paul Preston explains, the schism within the PSOE between the followers of Besteiro and Largo-Caballero was not clear cut, "the ideological differences between them were difficult to ascertain since both of them were reformists" (1977: 106) grounded on ideological differences but on the different strategies favored by each leader.

Mieres Starts the Revolution

The First Group -The Miners Advance -The March on Oviedo -The Enlistment- The Battle Fronts.

Mieres was the home of the revolution.[14] It is a large, dark town, spread over a mountain side where a red glow from the metallurgical factories broadcasts its presence. The huge mining valley spreads out from the foothills of Pajares to the gates of Oviedo; it leads to Mieres, where the most important industries, the companies and the technicians' offices are located, and it is where the workers' red painted homes are. In the evening, it swarms with men dressed in coveralls, tired, tousle-haired women with swollen eyes reddened by the heat of the workshops and by the slag heaps, and with dirty, ragged, truculent, little children who go out in search of coal on the riverbanks close to the sluicing places.

At sunset on day five, delegates from the revolutionary committees went out onto all the mountain roads, announcing a general strike and an armed uprising for the following day. The groups from Mieres had no weapons. Nevertheless, they had to get them and so they joined a group of communists and socialists who left at dawn

14 The Mieres plant, the fourth largest producer in the province, went bankrupt in February of 1934. A commission comprised of representatives of the courts, the Sindicato de Minas Asturianas, creditors, shareholders and industrialists took over. The commission was unable to pay the back wages owed to the workers. According to Adrian Shubert, most mining companies were two or three months behind (Shubert 1982, 272).

armed with pistols and shotguns. Without doubt, it was that group which started the revolution. They first went to the small barracks of the *guardia municipal*. It was an easy task there. The reserve *guardias* were asleep on their cots and barely had time to recover from their surprise on seeing some familiar faces among that group. The revolutionaries took their weapons and ammunition and left for a nearby gunsmith's store, where they rapped furiously on the door. The owner peered out of a window and was invited to hand over his weapons.

The storekeeper did not offer any resistance. But before letting the revolutionaries in, he telephoned the barracks of the *Guardia de Asalto*. Consequently, as they began to collect the store's shot guns and cartridges, the *Guardia de Asalto* turned up in a van. The revolutionaries fired before they could get out. Three *guardias* were wounded. The others, believing that their attackers were in larger numbers, retreated to the barracks of the *guardia urbana* where they barricaded themselves in.

But this was the signal for battle. Miners began to arrive from their villages with carbines and pistols. An immense crowd gathered in the Plaza de la Constitución, from where columns of volunteers set out to take the barracks. Several miners went armed with dynamite cartridges, ready to detonate them in case of resistance. And what happened in Mieres, happened almost simultaneously in the other coalfield towns, in Aller, in Pola de Lena and in Turón. By eight-thirty in the morning, all government units in that area had surrendered, but not before putting up some stiff resistance to the revolutionaries. Nevertheless, the avalanche was such that the whole valley was up in arms, like a flooding river carrying all with it.

There were amazing scenes in the Plaza de Mieres. After the surrender of the *Guardia de Asalto*, the masses asked that two who were known for their harsh repression of demonstrations, be handed over to them. The Committee refused. These two *guardias* were wounded and needed to be taken to the emergency hospital. When the crowd witnessed their arrival in the square, protected by workers, some ten men with shotguns came forward demanding to finish them off. The workers were forced to shield them with their own bodies to prevent them from being shot. But in a fit of panic, one of the *guardias* wearing a torn and bloodied uniform, tried to break through the protective cordon. No sooner had he done so than he was killed by two shotgun blasts.

Halfway through the morning, thousands of workers crowded around the Casa del Pueblo, from where the movement's orders were transmitted. The Transport Committee had impounded trucks and cars. The Provisions Committee had centralized the foodstuffs, announcing the abolition of money, instead providing food coupons for the civil population.

Trucks and cars were gathering in front of the Casa del Pueblo, their engines vibrating like impatient beasts. From time to time, in the midst of that tragic hubbub, excited, spirited voices were heard.

'Revolutionary volunteers for Oviedo!

Revolutionary volunteers for Campomanes!'

Men rushed the vans keen to be the first to leave. The majority climbed in without weapons, as there were not enough to go around. The miners were convinced that the decision to enter the fray and face the utmost danger showed that the struggle was more than necessary, in-

evitable. They almost cheerfully took leave of their friends, and during those awful days it was not unusual to hear chatter and banter coming from the top of the trucks

'Hey buddy, you can also die in the mine, !' shouted one of them, armed with an almost useless, old rifle.

'True, true. I threw my tools into the river yesterday. Long Live the Revolution!'

While they were organizing the fighting expeditions, groups of workers were attacking the gunpowder store and taking charge of the dynamite used in mining work. Others occupied the metallurgic workshops and factories where they formed teams to prepare the bombs which they were to use in the attack. Some of the artefacts were true infernal machines. They contained two packets of dynamite – some forty-two cartridges – and ten kilos of shrapnel made from steel rod trimmings. Many men toiled day and night in these workshops where they manufactured more than five thousand bombs.

The *guardia* barracks which took the longest time to surrender was at Campomanes, a mining town on the Northern Line, bordering León. It was there that a *Guardia Civil* corporal and a few men held out. On hearing the news in Mieres, many revolutionist groups set out; by three o'clock in the afternoon they had managed to overcome the *Guardia Civil* after killing the corporal and gravely wounding two guards. The barracks had contacted León for reinforcements and shortly after, a *Guardia de Asalto* truck appeared with a machine gun readied for action.

By then, the large grouping of miners was master of the town. The *Guardia de Asalto* were undoubtedly unaware that a veritable army awaited them. Scarcely had the truck appeared in one of the streets of Campomanes,

before volley fire destroyed half of its personnel. The *guardias* did not even have time to use their machine gun. The survivors threw themselves onto the ground and fanning out, made for the cover of a factory, where within the space of twenty minutes they were annihilated. A corporal and two men alone were able to flee up the hill across country towards León.

The terrain favored the revolutionaries' plans. The entire zone, running from Pajares is a succession of peaks and hills with deep ravines flanked by woodlands, where thousands of men could hide without being seen. The day after the first clash, the miners spontaneously set up a battle front. The committees' orders were labored and indecisive, but the men instinctively understood the demands of war and prepared for the assault. They assumed that forces tasked to defeat them would come from the León Line. Even though enthusiasm had generated the most optimistic rumors announcing the triumph of the proletariat everywhere, the miners were awaiting battle.

In fact, the first military forces, a Palencia cyclist battalion, appeared a few hours later, followed by another two infantry units. It was a very hard fight. The vanguard troops were almost totally overwhelmed, but the remainder, while suffering heavy losses, gained the Vega de Rey position, from where they held out under the miners' constant siege for a week, from 8 October to 16 October, the date when the revolutionary pressure finally slackened.

The march on Oviedo was much easier. Hundreds of miners enlisted for the front. The first battle between government forces and the insurrectionists took place right on the road, at a place known as *Cuesta de la Manzaneda*. The *guardias* occupied the houses from where they intended to

block the advancing groups but it was in vain. During continuous heavy fire the revolutionaries occupied the highest hill overlooking the enemy position. The latter had no option other than to abandon it and stage a fighting withdrawal towards the nearby hills. There the *guardias* were hunted down one by one, and after stripping them of their webbing and weapons, the miners marched like a whirlwind on Oviedo, where new and tragic days began.

On the roadway, fate had jumbled up the bodies of *guardias* and of revolutionaries. Next day, farmhands from nearby villages dug a ditch in the side of the hill and buried them in piles, under the droning roar of the first airplanes.[15]

15 The French built the Breguet 19 which was in service with Escuadra No 1 during the Asturian Revolution. This was a two-seater biplane with rear mounted 7.7 mm Vickers machine gun. It could carry up to 472 kilograms bombs located under its fuselage, or 50 kg in vertical bomb bay.

II – The Struggle In Campomanes

'The Argentinian' and his group - Champagne for the pariahs - Confusion at the front-The assault - A mysterious death.

Around three thousand miners assembled on the Campomanes battle front. Weapons were scarce; there was not enough weaponry until the La Vega Factory in Oviedo fell to the revolutionaries. On the other hand, the miners lacked a stable organization, and as they were operating on their own initiative, their actions were confused. The most basic support services barely functioned. Many young miners had taken sweethearts and wives along with them, and this was the support they relied on. These brave, defiant women encouraged and helped them, but they were an extraordinary obstacle in the fight against the troops.

The first fairly organized groups to arrive came from Moreda. At the head of one of them was a revolutionist who had been outstanding in his determination and courage in the taking of the barracks. His name was Gerardo Monje[16] and he worked as a clerk on various municipal projects. Monje had lived in Buenos Aires and still spoke with an Argentine accent. He was a magnificent shot. He had a *Guardia Civil*'s Mauser and webbing, and his comrades obeyed him as their unquestionable leader. The first thing he did was to name a young coalface

16 Gerardo Monje, like some of the other characters presented by José Díaz Fernández in his fictionalized documentary of the Asturias revolution, may have been a composite of different individuals that participated in the revolt.

worker, Antonio Martín, as his lieutenant. The Campomanes committee charged Monje with the capture of the railroad station at Linares, where according to secret information, there was a food convoy. In contrast, the workers in the town were short of food. They assumed that the station would be defended by military forces and ordered the revolutionaries there to attack it.

Monje deployed his men for battle. But as he reached the vicinity of the station he found only the station master and some railroad workers.

'Well, how stupid!' exclaimed Monje bursting into the station with his men, 'Food is close at hand, yet people are going hungry'

He immediately began to requisition the freight cars. There was flour, vegetables, canned food and even crates of champagne.

Locals who had arrived behind the miners, were keen to join in the looting, wildly pouncing on the food supplies. The 'Argentinian' stopped them. He fired at the feet of the first looters and they stepped back in terror. One, who was more determined and had refused to take any notice, was shot in his right arm. He then said in his thick Argentinian accent:

'Get back all of you! Nobody's taking anything from here until I decide how it's to be distributed. Whoever is hungry will eat, but I'm not standing for idiots...'

Then, he ordered his men to oversee the distribution. He put the locals into a line.

'Let's see, you "old woman" step forward. The rest of you, get in line by the third freight car'. To his comrades, 'Come here, get your rifles readied in case any pest tries it on.'

He then opened a freight car,

'Those who need potatoes...'

He distributed them fairly. Then he handed out vegetables, flour for bread, cans of fruit.

'Are you people satisfied?'

Someone grumbled,

He quickly replied, 'I won't stand for idiots; do you get me? There are shortages in the towns and there are children who are unable to eat. We all have the right to live and you will be alright for a few days. I'll share out what's left, do you get it? We won't touch any of it...'

He was true to his word. Those provisions somewhat alleviated the shortages that were apparent in the neighboring towns, where on certain days it took four hours standing in line to collect two pesetas' worth of foodstuffs. Much of the looting in those days had its origin in the hunger and exasperation of the masses.

Gerardo delivered the remainder to the Provisioning Committee. He requested they reserve the four crates of champagne for his men,

'I want to pop the corks one night, so that these mountain pariahs might drink what the swells drink in expensive hotels.'

Next day they tasked him with capturing a gun which the troops had sited in an extremely dangerous position.

'That gun,' said the chairman of the committee, a noted communist, 'dominates our front lines. Over recent days several comrades have been killed. The gun is causing as much damage as the airplanes.'

Gerardo Monje replied,

'I'll capture that 'little gun' comrade. But I would also beg you comrade to give a little consideration to the workers who are fighting. They sometimes go the whole day without even a mouthful of food.'

The organization was indeed a disaster. Anarchy reigned supreme in the auxiliary services. The miners feared that the struggle could only end in defeat. At that time, it was intensely cold in the mountains. It frequently rained and hailed. The miners out in the open, without blankets or overcoats, stoically bore that unforeseen campaign. Some were almost barefoot, with swollen feet in worn-out boots, or already useless espadrilles. They were sustained by the hope that the revolution was triumphing elsewhere, although the truth is, they were frequently isolated with no more than the odd proclamation from Mieres to renew their faith in the revolution.

There was unprecedented confusion in homes close to the front line, from where the groups were supplied. Women distributed the rations willy-nilly. Some 'ambushers' ransacked storerooms and fled in order to shelter from the gunfire.

Gerardo, who with his small column, was carrying out the instructions of the committees, wished to right those defects. However, it was already too late to put things to rights and bring a modicum of organization to the struggle. In fact, the committees which controlled that front line had allowed the least useful people to join. Swarms of thieves, crooks, women, and little children prowled around it, sowing unrest and anarchy.

The movement had slipped through the hands of its leaders.[17] The committee limited itself to sending out

17 Historians have not reached an agreement over whether the Asturian revolution had been a grassroots movement or a top-down one led by the Spanish Socialist Party and to a lesser extent the Communists and Anarchists. It seems, however, that the workers' frustration over decades of poor working conditions compounded with the threat to recent improvements in labor conditions that the economic recession brought with it had been reaching a tipping point. Adrian Shubert explains that "the unrest was general over the coalfields" well before October 1934 (273).

twenty-man patrols, as though it were trying to win such a difficult battle with lightning strikes, taking one position today and another one tomorrow. It lacked revolutionary expertise. On the other hand, there were squads of brave and forceful young miners ready to face death and offer up their lives to the revolution. While the romantic revolutionaries, hungry and barefoot, gave their lives on the barricades, others who were doing nothing, ate their bread and wore their overcoats and shoes, sharing out clothing which the revolutionaries had commandeered.

It was almost futile for Gerardo to submit messages to the committee at Mieres regarding how many topcoats, leathers, waterproof capes, trench coats and shoes remained unissued in stores. When a small batch arrived at the front line, the greater part of the clothing was unserviceable. There were revolutionaries who in order to rest a few hours, without their rain-drenched clothing, lay totally naked among the straw in a hay loft, like a chick in its nest.

On the third morning of Gerardo arriving at the front line, a beautiful day dawned. It was beautiful because the sun gilded the mountain tops; but terrible for those who had to fight against airplanes, rifle, and gun fire. The miners almost preferred rainy, foggy days.

While the sun was soaking up darkness from the mountains, the revolutionaries were taking up positions behind trees and furze bushes, ready to fight the troops and shoot down the airplanes that were dropping bombs and firing machine guns.

Gun fire swiftly alternated with the aerial bombardment. The foothills on the right, running down to Pajares, were in the greatest danger because they were bare of vegetation. The miners who were in the advanced po-