

March
1972

SPAIN: THE NOISE OF REBELLION

James Fox investigates the violence, repression and intrigue that characterise the open war that has broken out, after 30 years of enforced subservience, between Spanish workers and the Franco regime. Photographs by Colin Jones

The miners of the Asturias, the coal basin in the north of Spain, have no special love for Generalissimo Franco. They held out longer and harder than anyone else during the 1934 rebellion against the Republican Government and many remember with bitterness Franco's first major action in Spain after his return from Morocco that year, when he took the Foreign Legion, so expertly trained under his command, into the towns and villages of the Asturias to break the miners' stand. Terrible were the atrocities and bloody the consequences before and after Gijon and the regional capital, Oviedo, fell to his Moorish footsoldiers.

This winter the Asturian miners were fighting one of the longest industrial battles ever waged between workers and owners in Spain.

It was a strike that had spread like a grass fire from pit to pit. Within three days from October 1 almost all the State-employed miners were out, and many of those in the private pits as well. That had never happened in the Asturias before - usually it took time to warm up - and the Hunosa State mining company locked out the rest within a few days. On the 15th day the shopkeepers and market traders struck in sympathy until the police forced them to re-open, and that, too, was for the first time.

Strikes are still illegal in Spain, repression and punishments for those who lead them swift and harsh. Fear of the *guardia civil* and the 'social political' police, and the prospect of weeks without wages or strike pay means that a struggle with the State is not a thing lightly decided upon. Twenty thousand miners on strike represents a massive challenge to the Government's laws, and the kind of 'social indiscipline' that an officially fascist regime will use every means to suppress. Until 1965 striking used to be classified as military rebellion and treason, but the laws have become more manageable since then.

So stringent are the security measures taken by opposition groups in Spain that a way \rightsquigarrow

Right: Asturian miners - traditionally Franco's bitterest opponents. This winter they staged one of the longest strikes in their history. Far right: apartment blocks built for workers' families by the *sindicatos*, the official union. Most workers reject the *sindicatos* as a representative union



had to be prepared in advance by making contacts first in London, then in Paris, and finally I waited in Gijon to make contact with the workers' commissions, the illegal and thus clandestine group who claim to have organised 75 per cent. of the strikes which in the last three years have seriously worried Franco's Government. The car workers, the metal workers, the textile and construction workers, among others, staged demonstrations and strikes that took the Government by surprise and shook them hard. They had been used to almost 30 years of disciplined subservience and here was agitation in the factories that by its scale and spontaneity suggested flagrant rebellion.

Strikes had started to worry the regime in 1962, when the miners broke a record by staying out for two months, but by 1965 the police had skimmed the agitators from the factories - Amnesty International reported tortures and beatings in the Asturias in 1964 - and by 1968 everyone thought the commissions were dead. But in 1969 the Communist Party began reorganising them and in the last three years every important sector of Spanish industry has been affected by strikes and stoppages, too many to count up. In 1970 Spain had more strikes, all illegal, than any other European country except Italy. The official figures: 1600 collective conflicts, 500,000 workers on strike, nine million hours lost. And the Government snarled and snapped and spoke of 'indiscipline'.

They could not, or did not, want to see the signs of change, the consequences of the industrialisation they had set in motion, and of an expatriate labour force of one-and-a-half million who had become aware of better things in France and Germany and who were filtering back with the news. The police gave the movement its blood sacrifices which did more to stir public opinion to the desperate condition of Spanish workers than any mass parade through the streets. In two years five workers were shot by the police and the jails, as ever, are well stocked with political prisoners.

The workers' commissions worry the regime, because for all its expert policing of political opposition groups and the atmosphere of fear it has created to keep the Spanish people quiet, the commissions have a nationwide network and are, under the



Silicosis victim on surface work. In the Asturian mines you get it young

circumstances, highly organised. Regional differences and ideological squabbles have always plagued the opposition to Franco's regime. In the workers' commissions they have tried to pool their discontent, although splits are still evident, and the Government exploits them. Their optimistic aim is to bring about a general strike to end the Franco regime and prevent the succession of Juan Carlos.

The Asturias plays a heroic part in the Republican legend of the civil war. The big-fisted miners have the reputation of being the toughest and most politically minded of Spanish workers. Their tradition is Celtic and Gothic, their music the bagpipe and the drum. They drink cider and dress in folk costume which belongs more to the Netherlands than the Iberian peninsula. They are supported by a radical branch of a divided - some say opportunistic - Catholic Church which has come out for the workers' rights and has allowed its buildings to be used for meetings and sit-ins. The Bishop of Oviedo's recent pastoral letter demanded a distribution of wealth in Spain and criticised an "excessive disequilibrium" in Spanish society. "There are people who get astronomical quantities of money and who live in great luxury," he said, "whilst many others get insufficient wages to cover even their basic necessities." He called for a "fundamental transformation of the present judicial and economic structures". To Franco it was heresy and it was seen as a symbolic act of violence when the police charged into the Church of San Jose in Gijon last October and beat up the pensioners in the aisles and in the pews, forcing them into the street to end their sit-in demonstration. The

Bishop, provoked now, circulated another pastoral letter which said that the sanctity of the church had been violated; that the pensions were inadequate, that no worker could look forward to old age or disablement with any peace of mind. What he had in mind may have been silicosis or black lung which, given the conditions in the Asturian mines, puts a worker out of action sometimes before he is 30 and often before he is 40. In the Asturias there are 27,000 miners and 37,000 pensioners, whose benefits are fixed at the level they were entitled to when laid off - no allowance is made for inflation, which last year was around 16 per cent.

It was all in the list of demands that the company had failed even to acknowledge for six months before the miners walked out. There is no compensation for silicosis, only the penalty of being moved to a job where one quarter of your wage is deducted.

"You get retired when you have second degree," said a miner, "but by then it's usually third degree, sometimes worse." The minimum daily wage is £1.75 - the miners wanted it raised to £3 - and the piece-work rate has not been changed since 1967. "You are given a piece of seam five metres high and one metre long," said the miner. Most of the Asturian seams are vertical, doubling the difficulty and the danger. "To get a bonus on top of that, to make a living wage, you have to tear at the coal. You have to work like a beast and rip the stuff out as fast as you can. The faster you work the more dust you create, the faster you breathe and the quicker you get silicosis. If you get third degree you might live another six or eight years." In that time, while you

wait for your lungs to collapse, there will be insomnia and moments when you wonder whether your next breath will come at all. A miner begins to contract black lung the first day he works at the coal face. Adequate ventilation, heat control and medical attention, which, according to the miners I spoke to, was conspicuously absent in the Asturias, could give the miner his full life span.

So could adequate safety regulations, but the workers' commissions say that there are five times as many accidents in the Asturian pits as in any other European country, and they say the supervisors are young and inexperienced management trainees who have had little knowledge of the pits.

The Spanish Ministry of Labour have published the astonishing fact - which was greatly lamented in the government-controlled Press - that 12,000 Spanish workers died as a result of accidents at work between 1965-69 and 60,000 suffered serious injuries, and that in 1970 eight workers died for each working day. The rate of fatal accidents in the Hunosa pits is 1.3 per thousand employees. In the first fortnight of 1972, nine workers died in the pits. The Communist Party newspaper *Mundo Obrero* says that the number of deaths at work in the Asturian mines increased by 12.9 per cent. between 1969 and 1970.

Bad management has always plagued the Asturian mines particularly. In the Forties and Fifties the private owners raked in handsome profits and spent next to nothing on modernisation, so by the mid-Sixties they were going bankrupt, and nervously pressing the Government to nationalise. The Government conceded, but paid such gross over-compensation that they could almost be believed when they claimed later that there was no money available for re-equipping and modernisation. Last year the Cortes, the Spanish rubber-stamp Parliament, was asked to go through the formality of writing off an eight million pound loss for the State-owned period, 1967-71.

The recent strike ended after the seventh week when the miners ran out of food and credit with the shopkeepers. None of their demands was met. Two thousand, eight hundred miners had been detained, most of them released - provisionally.

It is said in Madrid that the miners can strike longer because they all have smallholdings on the hillsides. Investigations carefully carried

out show that only about 5 per cent. have this facility. The rest are urbanised and depend on cash and kindly shopkeepers. For the second time coal had been sent from Poland. The miners find that hateful. The last time, the workers' commissions wrote to the Polish Government asking why a Socialist country would want to break their strike. "They replied," said an organiser, "by saying they had a long-standing trade agreement with Spain which could not be broken. We wrote to the unions but got no reply."

The Polish Government's relationship with the Franco regime is becoming increasingly friendly. The Poles, ironically enough, have been called in to 'rationalise' the Hunosa mines. The company has adopted one of the recommendations of the Polish technicians - that production should be reduced to 6.9 million tons, 4000 miners should be sacked and a few pits closed. You will always hear the rumour in Madrid that the Asturian mines are hopelessly uneconomical and the Government would like to close them down, and import all but a little of their coal. The miners treat the idea as propaganda. The mines, they say, could be profitable if they

were well managed, but the Government import coal now to show that the mines are uneconomical, and to prepare the way for the total close-down of the politically troublesome coal basin. It is, however, questionable whether the Spanish economy could easily withstand a bill for imported coal of an estimated £50 million a year.

Labour relations in the Asturias are not just bad, they are non-existent. It is an almost universal experience in Spanish industry which encourages the workers' commissions in their hopes for a general strike. The stratification of Spanish society is so rigid that there is precious little contact between its different layers, and no way for the workers to express themselves except through the rigid bureaucratic channels of the *sindicatos*, the vertical, government-sponsored trade union. The complexities of its structure, which looks in the end like a pyramid with a Minister at the top, its welfare activities - houses for workers, holiday camps, social security, labour universities, the training of shop stewards - and its strict laws for the protection of individual workers (which often leads

to overmanning since employers cannot sack workers easily) have persuaded some Labour Members of Parliament in Britain that the *sindicatos* is quite admirable. They are not to be believed. Nor are its apologists in Spain who argue with great vehemence and pride that it is a model of democratic labour relations. On a practical level the *sindicatos* is little short of farcical, and, created originally by the Falange as a means of controlling the economy, it perpetrates a paternalistic and aggravating insult to the working class in Spain. Workers and employers belong to the same union and meet under one roof to sort out their differences. On small, localised disputes at factory level, it can be quite efficient. At this stage the elections are free and democratic, but when the elections reach provincial level the machine starts tampering with them, and putting in its own men. As soon as a dispute reaches provincial, or national, importance, therefore, the bosses do all the talking. The State employs 50,000 bureaucrats to absorb workers' union activities, and the *sindicatos* has become a means of climbing the power structure for ambitious men from the lower middle class. At the

top, in the Cortes, sit 150 *sindicatos* representatives.

The Spanish laws spoil any pretence that the *sindicatos* is a forum for free collective bargaining. The fundamental Labour Law of 1967 says, "Wages shall be the minimum necessary to enable the worker to lead a moral and honourable life." And, "The standard of living shall be raised gradually and rigidly for the workers as allowed by the higher interests of the nation."

The workers reject the *sindicatos* as a union that represents them. Any delegation that walks into its offices with a list of demands is likely to have all its members locked up under the law of public order. In 1967 miners were arrested in the *sindicatos* building in Mieres for advocating a general strike if their demands were not met. Four got one year's imprisonment, the rest five years. In the spring of 1971 the miners had to collect signatures secretly, in the washrooms of the pits, for their list of demands. By July they had 20,000 signatures which they presented to the mining engineers, not to the *sindicatos*. The Civil Governor of the Province, Mateu de Ros, 'lamented'

the fact that the miners had not presented their claims through the *sindicatos*. A few weeks later in Oviedo a meeting of the *sindicatos* was held to tell the miners that their claims could not be met for at least three months because of a credit squeeze. On the platform, presiding over the meeting, was the same Mateu de Ros sitting beside the head of the social police for the region, a man known with little affection simply as Ramos. No miner was allowed to speak. Probably no miner would have dared speak under the circumstances. It was Mateu de Ros, also, who said that the cost of living had risen by 3 per cent. in the last year, when even the official figure was 9 per cent. and the real figure was 15.

In Barcelona when the workers' commissions decided to get their members elected to provincial posts, a transport executive put himself up as a candidate. The *sindicatos*, he said, refused to give him the statutory list of electors - he had 10 days to discover them for himself - and then when the ballot papers were returned the *sindicatos* told him that they were spoilt because of a printing technicality and the winning candidates would be all those who came

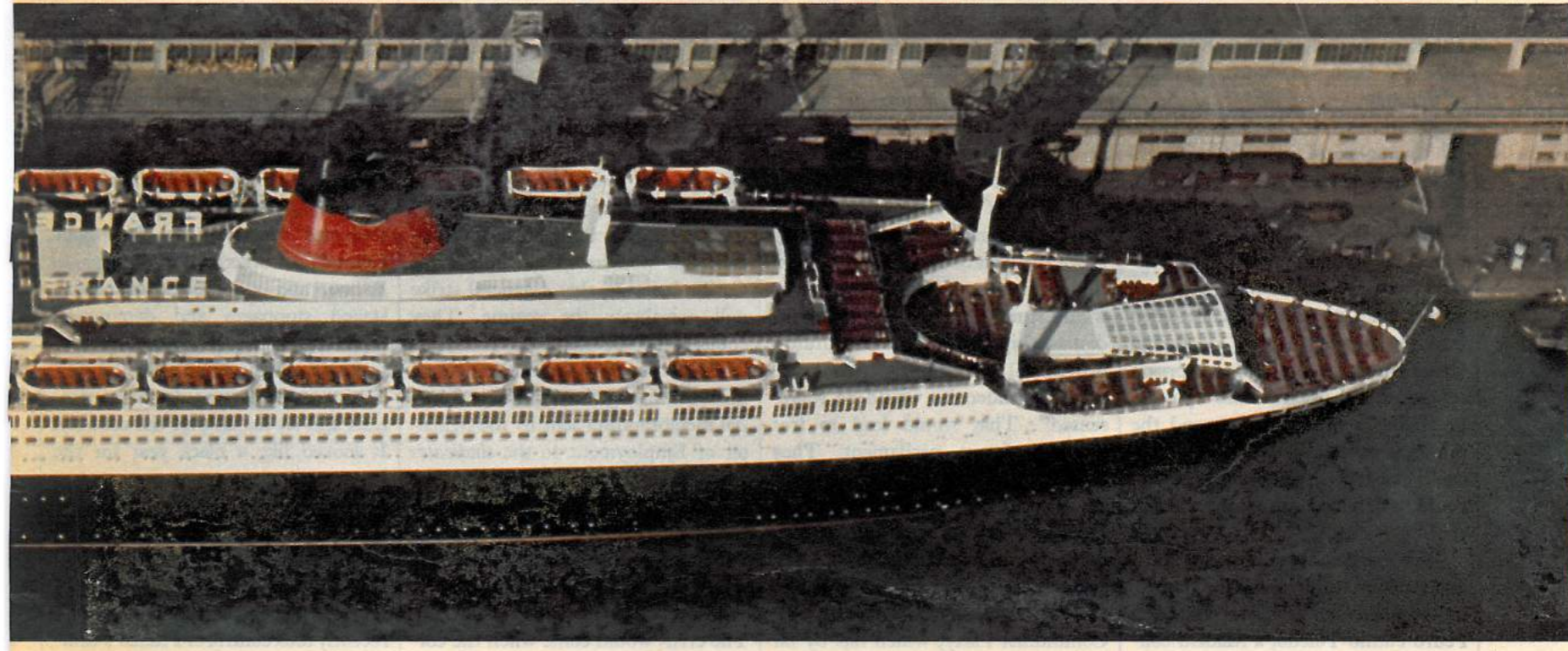
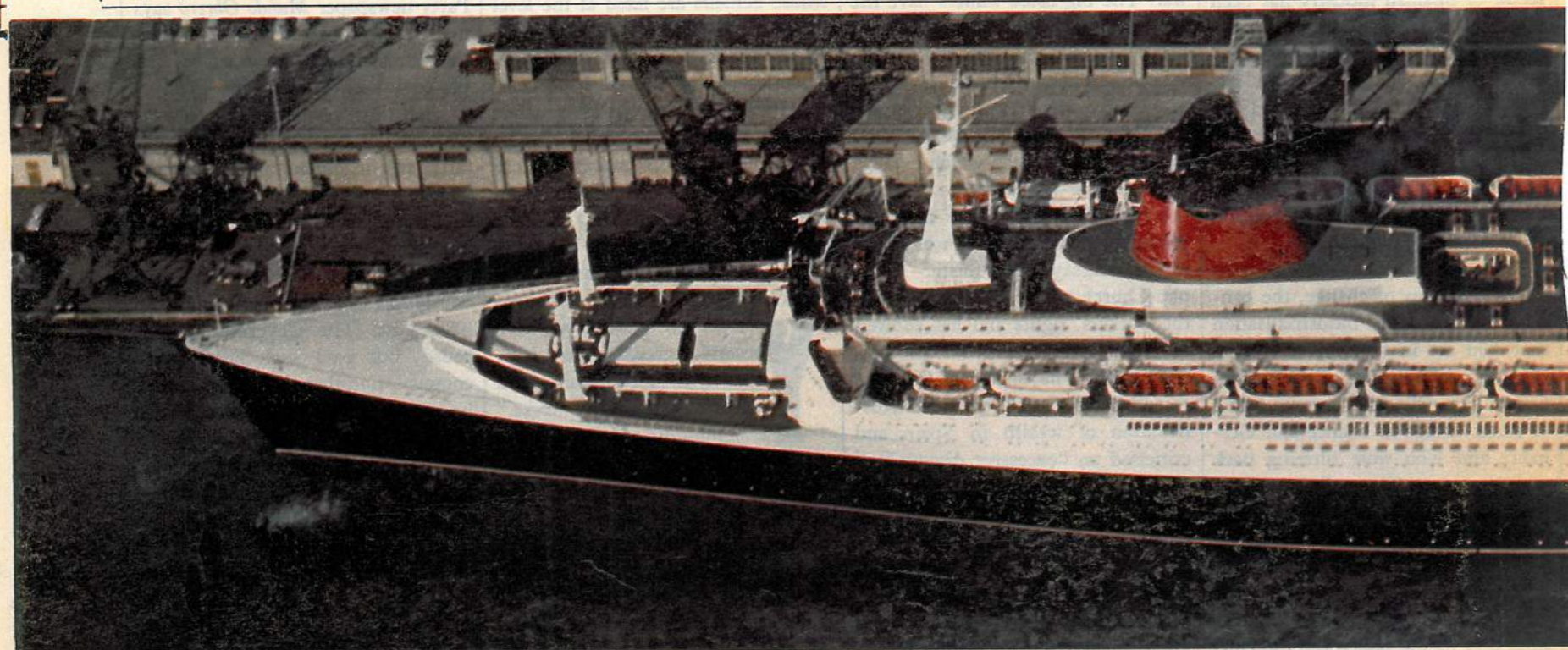
second in the ballot - thus neatly eliminating all workers' commission representatives.

But the commissions had spectacular successes in 1971, of which the most dramatic was the day-long battle between police and workers at the SEAT factory outside Barcelona. The workers' demands were not met. The success lay in the mobilisation of 8000 workers, the total work force in the factory that day, in a direct confrontation with the management and then with the police. All through the summer there had been labour troubles at SEAT where 24,000 workers, many well paid by Spanish standards, are employed producing two-thirds of Spain's cars. One political observer described it as the only organised proletariat in Spain, and in 1970, despite the rigid pay structures, they managed to get a 23 per cent. pay rise. Then in May 1971 the workers thought they had been cheated on their production bonuses. Next, three workers were suspended for insisting on going to the lavatory against the orders of the section chief. Militancy had been growing among the workers since the syndical elections in May where there was an overwhelming vote for the

workers' commissions candidates. Stoppages were answered with dismissals and lockouts. By June 18, the company had locked out 5000 workers and the Labour Court took the dispute in hand. By August they decided that the workers had been unjustly dismissed by SEAT. Either the company must take them back or pay an indemnity. Twenty-three of the workers demanded their jobs back and SEAT flatly refused. It smouldered on until October 18, the day the commissions decided to smuggle nine of the sacked workers back into the factory. They got inside by using borrowed identity cards and began persuading the workers to strike. By 7 a.m. the police had arrived. By 10 a.m. all the workers were chanting and shouting outside the management offices and all the workshops were empty. By 12.30 the factory was surrounded with riot police, known as *grises*, plain-clothes social political police, *guardia civil*, water cannon and even a helicopter.

Under the circumstances the management showed amazing tactlessness by calling in armed police. But for three hours there was stalemate. Then at 12.30 there was an ulti-

matum: unless the sacked workers changed their clothes and left within 15 minutes, the police would come in. The workers retreated into one of the workshops. At 2.30 a group of civilians made their way slowly to the workshop door. One of them was Ramos's equivalent in Barcelona, the chief Superintendent of Police, Antonio Creix. His brother Rafael Creix Nunez heads the social political police division which investigates the activities of the Communist Party. "He said, 'What do you want?'," a worker who was there remembers. "We said we wanted a dialogue with the directors, because we won the trial to reinstate the workers. There was a dialogue and at the end Creix said, in a furious voice, 'Yes, but what do you want?' and one of the workers shouted our demands: first a reinstatement of the workers, second a 40-hour week and an increase of 3000 pesetas." The workers had also been fraternising with the police, asking them about their salaries, their work. So strong was the mutual identification of social background, it appears, that the Civil Governor had to threaten the officers with court martial if their men did not charge the workers. When the attack



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started, workers occupied different parts of the factory in groups, building barriers, creating diversions and finally picking up factory tools and fighting hand to hand. One worker, Antonio Ruiz Villalba, knocked a policeman from his horse and pinned him against the wall. The policeman got his gun loose and fired five bullets into Ruiz's body. The fight continued in the streets outside the factory as workers began escaping. Villalba's name became folklore like that of Horatio Fernandes Inguanzo, one of the best and most famous of the Asturian organisers. The police caught him walking in the streets of Mieres in 1969. He had been on the run for 12 years, hiding in the villages and mountains with a 20-year sentence booked against him for his part in the civil war. He had a piece of sausage on him, and a piece of bread and 125 pesetas in his pocket. Inguanzo was charged with being a member of the Communist Party and with inciting all the labour unrest in the region since 1960, but he was never brought to trial. Faced with the busloads of people from the Asturias who had come to watch the proceedings against him, the judge tried to hold the case in camera. The defence reminded him that any Spanish trial was open to the public so the judge declared that the trial had been suspended by order of the State.

Estimates in Madrid put the number of political prisoners in Spanish jails at about 1000, although it is a floating population. To make the round-up simpler, the Law of Banditry and Terrorism has been repealed and its scope incorporated into the draconian Law of Public Order which imposed harsher prison sentences and heavier fines - you go to prison if you can't pay, and the police, if necessary, will see that you can't - and provided that a person could be detained six months without trial.

For martyrs there were the three construction workers shot in Granada by the police last year, and there was Pedro Patino Toledo, a Madrid construction worker who was shot in the back at point blank range by a member of the *guardia civil* early one morning, while he was distributing leaflets about a forthcoming strike of construction workers.

Of all the wage-earners in Spain, it is the construction workers like Patino who get the worst deal. They

are made up of the unskilled workers; they get the lowest pay - 23 pesetas an hour on a building site - and the worst treatment. Seventy-four per cent. of them are casual labourers, according to the Institute of Statistics, and in Madrid alone 14,000 of them are unemployed, according to the commissions. The ones that do get work, they say, are made to sign blank contracts and undated letters of dismissal. In August, 100,000 construction workers struck in Barcelona - which provided an excuse simply for the employers to get rid of surplus labour. And in Madrid, during the strike that Patino's leaflets were urging, 40,000 workers stayed out for one week. In neither case were any demands granted.

The organisation of the workers' commissions starts at the factory, goes to the branch co-ordinating commission which concerns the trade (metal, glass, building, textiles) and then to the local commission and finally to a national congress. A militant, but non-Communist, co-ordinator in Barcelona told me that the members at the branch and local level are all Communist Party members, "because they are the only ones who know what they want and 90 per cent. of the people are apolitical". But not all political parties co-operate with the workers' commissions and indeed some of them are in total opposition to their methods.

The workers' commissions appear to be staking a great deal on the possibility of bringing off a general strike. The main object is to bring down the Franco regime and prevent the succession of Juan Carlos, who would simply prolong the Franquist dictatorship, and then to constitute a provisional government "where all political tendencies would be represented". That would lead to free elections for a parliament. They would demand a general amnesty for all political prisoners and exiles. Ironically this programme is supported by a majority of opposition groups in Spain, and by Sergio Carillo, Secretary General of the Communist Party, which has by far the strongest stake in opposition. They say it is a provisional pact for liberty. A member of the national assembly of the workers' commissions told me: "The Party says that the workers are not in a position to win power, therefore they must make a pact with the bourgeoisie to get the key to the door, to get their freedom

to form free workers' associations and political parties. We don't hide the fact that we think the workers can be the leaders, but we need the economic strength of the bourgeoisie on our side." This is anathema to the political groups to the left of Carillo's Communist Party. For example, the ORT (*Organización Revolucionaria de Trabajadores*) who mount campaigns to boycott the syndical elections - apparently with some success - accuse the workers' commissions of being opportunists and collaborationist. One young 'Trotskyite' told me, "The workers' commissions have a strong bureaucratic network, but very little grassroots support. Their semi-legal structure which they started with went to Carillo's head and he made the mistake of going out in the open."

"Carillo works on the hypothesis that it is possible to obtain formal democratic liberties in Spain, whereas the reality is that the Spanish regime gets more repressive as the workers become more aware. Every time the Left has managed to get some liberal concessions out of the regime, it has subsequently strengthened its repression. The head of steam is building up now; it's still insipid, but for that reason the regime cannot afford to liberalise, because it is mediaeval in character. They can't re-do the democratic experience of England or France. It's too late. What Carillo does is simply to instigate unrest in general without organisation and without making the regime liberalise. Strikes should be used as a means to organise and educate the workers. It is untrue, as Carillo believes, that a general strike will overthrow the regime. They could easily withstand it."

Early this year the workers' commissions managed to steal a confidential memorandum sent by the Minister of Employment to the *sindicatos* which warned that industrial action was going to become widespread in the last part of last year and in early 1972. It put the blame on the increase in the cost of living and the release of political leaders from jail. The crisis would come when the collective agreements between workers and employees came up for renewal for the new year. "Periods of social tension can be foreseen," said the memorandum. "The increase in the cost of basic necessities has created strong pressure of a psychological nature which is translated into demands for very large wage increases."

It ordered the official union to arrest organisers wherever possible, to break up picket lines, to help silence newspapers. The commissions got hold of a second memorandum which gave a profile of the commissions themselves, seen from the Ministry of Labour's viewpoint. They had great powers of mobilisation, it said, especially in Madrid. They were well co-ordinated locally and internationally. They had power to extend labour conflicts to a national scale, which would have major repercussions abroad. They used church halls for their local meetings and could rely on the support of the progressive clergy. They had friends among foreign correspondents, and in a certain section of the Catholic Press. But, said the memo, there was a diversity of ideology in their ranks which, if exploited skilfully, could help their disintegration. There was a gap between the leaders and the rank and file which made their slogans less efficient. They had to operate openly and acted against. The leadership, it suggested, should be removed from the top, which would make co-ordination difficult and would lead to confusion.

The Ministry of Labour were right in their predictions. As the collective agreements came up, the workers struck for increases and better conditions. The car workers, the metal workers, especially at Chrysler and the Fiat-Hispania factory in Barcelona, the bank employees and transport workers, the Telephone Company workers, the dockers in Bilbao, and a long list of others, staged stoppages and demonstrations and suffered repression and sackings. At the same time the university students staged violent protests and sit-ins all over the country. It looked like a black year for the Franco regime.

While it is attacked from the outside, the regime also shows signs of crumbling from within. The technocrats of the Opus Dei, who recently took control of Franco's cabinet in a reshuffle, have intimated that the political structures need modifying if Spain is to develop as a capitalist country. But they are violently opposed by Falangist and old guard bureaucrats, and their rivalry has prevented any potential structural changes. But much of the liberal stance of the Opus Dei seems to have

been for the benefit of the outside world. Foreign Minister Lopez Bravo spends much of his time promoting a new liberal image for Spain as a candidate for the Common Market, while they seem to have little intention of internal liberalisations. Political observers in Madrid believe that the regime is paralysed by its own inflexibility and has run out of policy. The economic growth that Spain enjoyed in the past few years has almost come to a standstill. Banks are finding it difficult to lend money because of what the President of the Catalan Council of Industrialists called a lack of confidence.

"Many people would like to go to bed," said one Barcelona businessman, "and sell their enterprise for half its cash value. The development plan is an illusion."

The forces which for so long kept Franco so securely in power, the army and the Church in particular, are also divided. The Church, because of its decision in its recent annual assembly to fight for social justice and democracy, has become a thorn in the Caudillo's side, and the army Chief of Staff, Diez Alegria, is considered a liberal by Spanish standards, although many people believe that certain elements in the army will attempt a *coup d'etat* when Franco dies. There have been signs that the far Right wing, to whose acts of violence the Government and the police always turned a blind eye, is becoming a serious embarrassment. The *guerrilleros del Cristo Rey*, who also describe themselves as the anti-Marxist commandos, drew worldwide attention to themselves last year when they tore up Picasso paintings in a Madrid gallery and set fire to another gallery where the artist's works were on display. The guerrilleros' mentor is Blas Piñar, the ultra Right-wing fanatic who, among other activities, organises annual masses in Madrid for the souls of Hitler and Mussolini. After the Picasso raid the Government finally ordered them arrested and found not to their surprise that the gang included two police officers. To a Spaniard who belongs to the conservative pressure group, Juan Ruiz, and hopes to be included in the cabinet of Juan Carlos, I said that people would watch with fascination the events that took place after Franco's death. "I don't know with fascination or with laughter," he replied, "because politically we are now the circus of Europe." ●



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