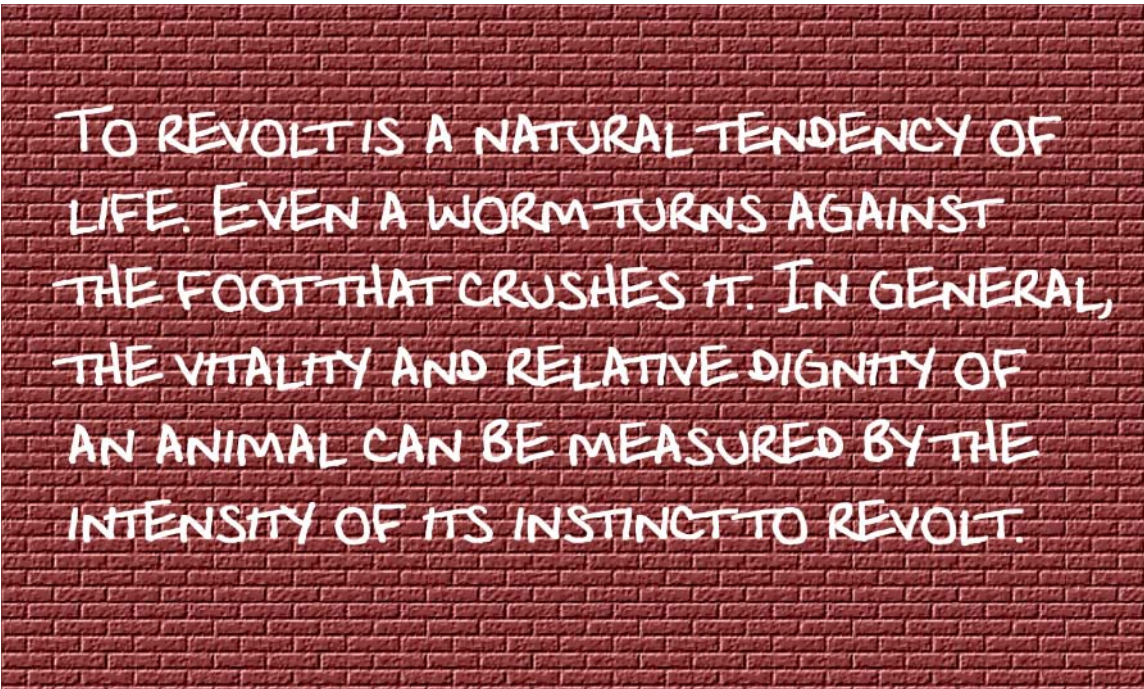


Chapter 9.

The Worm Begins To Turn.



TO REVOLT IS A NATURAL TENDENCY OF LIFE. EVEN A WORM TURNS AGAINST THE FOOT THAT CRUSHES IT. IN GENERAL, THE VITALITY AND RELATIVE DIGNITY OF AN ANIMAL CAN BE MEASURED BY THE INTENSITY OF ITS INSTINCT TO REVOLT.

Mikhail Bakunin, Russian Revolutionary.

A succession of notable visitors to the Sierra Almagrera wrote accounts of their impressions of the mines and of the miners themselves. When I read the first of these accounts of the workers, I thought that they were somewhat fanciful. All that whistling and singing, cheerfulness and good humour seemed too good to be true. I rather suspected that it was an act, a diversion tactic to divert attention away from whatever fraud, trick or racket that they were engaged in. However, the same things were remarked upon time and time again. Pié y Allué in 1883 wrote,

“The Almagrera miner is, without dispute, the worker most praiseworthy that can be known: fearlessness, good nature, sobriety, obedience and honesty are the virtues that are readily noticed in them.”

Even Simonin, who had visited mines throughout the world, wrote in 1867,

“They are a warlike, orderly, brave and intelligent race, all of whom, whether miners, muleteers, or founders, do their duty without noise, and obey the orders of their chiefs.”

So, was I simply being cynical and was my past experience in the world of work scams clouding my judgment?

The plurality of their occupations may have shaped their temperament. Stoicism is the only defence against weather, remonstrating won't bring rain to your parched fields, complaining won't abate the wind, lamenting won't revive livestock that has been lost. So accept what can't be changed, smile, sing and be merry (and cheat a little along the way). Isolation and ignorance were two other factors which would have influenced the workers' acceptance of the conditions of near servitude in which they lived and worked. Far from any sizable town and unable to read or write, what is, is, and how would you know any different? Even the migratory work pattern did not reveal a better way of life, for they were masters of neither the land nor the mine and so the status quo was maintained. But, as those who started working there as young boys grew old, and their children also, and with more and more abusive practices being heaped upon them, things were bound to change. A hint of the change of can be sensed in Souviron's comments in 1898, he is full of praise for the workers but comments on the fact that they are prone to excesses. He doesn't go into detail, but it was probably the same thing to which the working classes in other parts of Europe turned to, the blessed oblivion of alcohol.

“Despite, going through a neglected childhood and poorly nourished puberty, overloaded with excess physical work in the most unhygienic conditions that is possible to imagine, this operator, not stout and sturdy, is nevertheless capable of developing incredible stamina at work. Of tanned skin, lean musculature, steely tendons and strong skeleton, admirably supporting fatigue, for which he seems trained and in which he has been hardened since childhood, although so robust natures often decay prematurely into the senseless wantonness with which they exhaust his reserves.”

The rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. As the workers passed through Cuevas to their homes at the end of each varada, they surely could not have failed to notice the houses that were being built, each one more magnificent than the next. All the while their own fortunes were precarious. Agriculture was dependent on the rain, while the mines were frequently flooded and men laid off. A prolonged period of drought in the 1880's, coupled with problems with the pumping station saw many unemployed. Finally, the workers found a voice, albeit a timid one. It was not against the work conditions that they spoke, but rather against the employment of foreigners when they themselves were without work. How often does this trope raise its head? The idea of this measure as a solution to their woes came from La Unión, the place not the organization, where foreign workers had been replaced by unemployed locals following protests. The authorities in Cuevas were either sympathetic to the workers concerns, or worried by the sight of quite large groups of men on the streets, and tried to find employment for them on civil projects.

The next decade saw the opposite problem for agriculture, a series of devastating floods, while the mines were completely paralyzed, inundated once more due to problems with the pumping station. Once again, the men went to Cuevas, demanding – respectfully – that something be done to alleviate the situation. It must be remembered that one of the principle problems with the de-watering plant was the non-payment of

contributions to its running costs by the mine owners. As the number of people on the streets increased and became bolder and more vociferous, promises were made and this time kept. The Cuevas dignitaries made representations to the Ministry of Development and the courts passed a law in 1889 enforcing payment of contributions. The new desagüe at El Arteal revitalized the Sierra Almagrera’s mining industry, work was to be found, and the abusive exploitation of the workers carried on unabated.



The pumping station in the Jaroso. Failure of the pumps saw the men frequently laid off with no pay.

Rodrigo.

Like everywhere else in Europe, Socialism had been on the rise in Spain throughout the second part of the 19th Century. The first strike in Spain was in 1855, The Spanish Socialist Workers Party, the PSOE, was founded in 1879 and the UGT, the Unión General de Trabajadores was formed in 1882. Even the church was getting in on the act, Pope Leo XII in 1891 published the Social Doctrine of the Church and the Christian Labour Movement came into being. All of this largely passed the Almagrera by. With no concentration of the population in a mining town and, by now, fewer workers at the individual mines, the critical mass needed for action against injustices simply wasn’t present. The Frenchman Casimir Delamarre wrote,

“If you wanted to judge the workers in southern Spain comparing them with those of the most advanced players in Europe, you would make big mistakes. Indeed, workers in the province of Almería lack the training and the desire to improve, unlike those of our country. They ignore the value of the word democracy, they don't know what is meant by socialism and communism. In fact, even those who all year round work in the mines, they are still peasants. If they are lucky, they leave to serve the king, but not the country, a meaningless expression for them; they also respect authority. Yet, his character is proud, and even when the victims of misery they do not become servile or obsequious.”



A rallying call to strike action.

Peñas Negras.

Dissent however was on the wind. A little further north in Murcia, in the mining town of La Unión, the worm was turning in earnest, and it was against the payment by vales, the truck system that provoked the men. La Unión was a mining town in the fullest sense of the word, everyone depended upon the industry and more importantly they were unionized. The 1898 strike against this system was a very violent affair. The rail and telegraph lines were cut, the City Hall and Civil Registry were burnt down, and, when joined by workers from neighbouring districts, the Civil Guard Barracks suffered the same fate. With three dead and many injured, the Civil Governor declared a 'state of war' in the province. The point had been made and thereafter the workers were paid in real money, rather than with coupons. This result was in contrast to the outcome of a protest in the Almagrera, in 1895 against the same system. In this case it was the men who transported the ore from the mine Convenio de Vergara in the Jaroso to the foundry who protested. It was not so much that the system was unfair to them, so much as it affected their mules and donkeys, since fodder had to be bought from the company source at massively inflated prices. The refusal to transport the ore was short lived, just a few days, before penury persuaded the men to go back to work.

While workings and workers were relatively scattered in the mountains, the same was not true of Las Herrerías. The massive, opencast exploitation of iron ore brought hundreds of workers together. News from the wider world was coming in to the area, brought in by the steamers that carried coal in and iron ore out. There had been grumblings about the length of the working day and workers' remuneration in Las Herrerías before, negotiations with the operators resulted in a theoretical reduction in hours. When, a year later in 1899, the same hours were still being worked, the first strike there occurred. The working day was reduced to 10 hours, which was sensible since most of the workings were opencast. Satisfied with that, and somewhat intimidated by a strong contingent of the Civil Guard, the workers returned to work. The company responded by sacking the instigators of the unrest, and cutting the meal and rest breaks of the workers, thus lengthening the working day. With no union backing it was, to say the least, a hollow victory!

The new century saw more organized protests, but not necessarily instigated by the mine workers, nor initially against their working conditions. The burden of taxes was having an effect on all sections of society in Cuevas. The impact on the mines was crippling, particularly hard hit were those mines worked 'a partido', that is to say leased for a percentage of output. With margins cut to the bone additional taxes resulted in the closure of many of the smaller mines and unemployment for many workers. In 1902, alongside people from all works of life, the miners walked the streets of Cuevas in an attempt to save their jobs. Under the banner, 'Trabajo – Supresión de Impuestos', they called for less taxation in order that they might work, even though the conditions of that work were deplorable.



The rally in Cuevas.

*de Blain.
From Memoria Visual del Siglo XX.
Enrique Fernández Bolea.*

The gathering of so many miners, followed probably, by groups from different mines coming together in ventas, seems to have fostered a new feeling of solidarity amongst them, for two months later they again took to the streets in force. This doesn't appear to have been an organized affair, it seems to have been more

a fluid event, when workers in the Rosario mine downed tools and headed for Guzman and Fuensanta, where others joined them. As they headed down the Jaroso, they were joined by more and more men. Eventually, according to accounts, more than 3,000 men from the Sierra Almagrera and Las Herrerías joined in a demonstration in the Plaza de la Constitución in Cuevas. They asked to meet the mayor to present their petition for a 10 hour working day, increased wages and the commitment not to hire foreign workers while there was unemployment in the sector. (Sounds familiar!) A couple of days later, the Guardia arrested eight workers and hauled them off to Cuevas, provoking a protest which was met by force at the entrance to the town. A young man died, two were critically injured and dozens had serious injuries, but were unable to enter the town to seek treatment.



A similar strike, demanding bread and work at an unknown town, in the early 20th century.

elcuadrenodigital.com

The hero of the hour was the mayor, Segura Campoy, who, rather than raise the stakes in the conflict, decided to facilitate negotiations between the parties concerned. Whether this was because he himself considered their demands to be just, or whether he was very aware of the events which were sweeping Europe, and saw that change was inevitable, is unknown. In the event, using the poor state of the mines and of the mining industry as a mitigating factor, the owners managed to negotiate a settlement which only went some way towards meeting the workers' demands. The working day was set as from six to six with two hours for rest and meals within that period, giving a 10 hour working day. A demand for bi-weekly payment of wages was not met, but monthly payment was agreed, advances on pay were accepted in the form of vales, providing that they could be exchanged equitably. The owners side-stepped the demand for more pay by allowing the men to provide their own food if they so wished. Those who chose to do so would thus receive the 75 cents which previously had been withheld, effectively giving them a miniscule pay rise. The men returned to work, no doubt knowing in their heart of hearts that the accord would be short lived.

Following these negotiations, Segura Campoy set up a board, to be chaired by himself, comprising three workers' representatives and three employers' representatives. This move, recognising and championing the inherent pragmatism of the peasant miners, was to his credit and probably saved the area from the mass disturbances which were blighting the rest of the country. Indeed, over the following years, Campoy and his successor Andrés Márquez Navarro, acted as mediators, negotiating peaceful settlements in the inevitable disputes caused when companies back-tracked on previous agreements. The most notable of which was one involving the Men from Bilbao, the Argentiífera, at the Guzman mine. Here, the underground workers had

secured a small pay increase, which the company financed by reinstating catering contractors, unilaterally deducting the 75 cents from the workers. The surface workers wanted a comparative pay rise, and all of the workers wanted a cessation of the contract meals. When the hundred workers concerned went to Cuevas, the mayor negotiated on behalf of the men and secured both the pay rise and the return to the no meal deal. The company was also dissuaded from pursuing its hard-line approach towards the workers' representatives whom they wished to fire.

Making the case.
relats.org



The Argentífera, who were by this time the dominant player in the Almagrera, continued to maintain an uncompromising approach to labour relations, refusing to be part of the employers' and workers' board, and always seeking ways to circumvent injunctions. This stance became less tenable when the men affiliated themselves with the moderate workers' association, Amor Y Libertad. Now they were speaking with one voice, still had the support of the mayor of Cuevas, and, more importantly, were prepared for peaceful strike action when reasonable negotiations failed. It still took several years for full compliance with the 1902 conditions to be achieved, but it did finally come about, along with the end of workers having to live on credit. This particular breakthrough was brought about by threatened strike action in Las Herrerías against Luis Siret's Société Minière d'Almagrera. While the workers demanded weekly payment, a complicated compromise system was settled upon whereby 80% of the accrued wages were paid every 10 days, together with the 20% balance from the previous month. The days of being in debt to your employer were over, but the tallyman took his place.

The area never fully recovered from the aftermath of the First World War, wages were the lowest in the whole of Spain, the working day continued to be excessively long, and workers' safety was never a consideration. The excesses of Socialism, Communism and Anarchism largely passed the area by and as Spain descended into the horrors of the Civil War, the Almagrera people continued to, '*do their duty without noise, and obey the orders of their chiefs*'. Here, the worm only wriggled, and never really turned, for revenge was never sought, rather, they succeeded because their famed physical stamina was matched by their indefatigable tenacity.