

Text

Some events are remembered in the collective memory as moments of triumph, and the La Canadenca strike is one of them. Securing an eight-hour day was undoubtedly a great milestone in the struggle for labour rights for the working class. 100 years on from those events, this exhibition endeavours to highlight Catalonia's role in attaining such a significant improvement in labour conditions.

The strike was initiated at the company Riegos y Fuerza del Ebro, which was responsible for the electrification project in Catalonia. It was led by the Catalan regional committee of CNT, the Confederació Nacional del Treball (National Confederation of Labour), and won by workers from different parts of Catalonia who played a leading role.

This exhibition is divided into three areas: context, the strike itself, and the long struggle to limit the working day to eight hours.

To provide a visual narrative of the events, to identify some of their main protagonists, and to give us better insight into the period, the exhibition uses images by photojournalists and cartoonists, footage, original documents and reflections from people who played a key role. Moreover, the exhibition is presented in chronological order to help viewers get a better understanding of each stage of the mobilisation.

Achieving an eight-hour day marked a watershed in labour conditions, however the syndicalist struggle still continues today with many working rights yet to be attained.

1. Context

Understanding the backdrop against which the events occurred is essential to comprehend the mobilisation. The strike began at La Canadenca, the first multinational to operate in Catalonia. The company carried out its activity in the energy sector, which was key to the economy, in the production and distribution of a new source of energy at the time: electricity.

The period was marked by change in the labour movement: fragmented workers' organisations gradually gave way to large trade unions, one of which led the mobilisation, the anarchist CNT. In the Catalan political context, it is important to note the role played by an institution, the Commonwealth of Catalonia, which had managed to federate the four provincial councils in order to better manage resources and which went to great lengths to obtain approval for the first Statute of Autonomy.

1.1. La Canadenca

The second industrial revolution was characterised by the use of new sources of energy: petroleum and electricity. In Catalonia, between 1897 and 1913, great progress took place in the electrical industry when it was applied to lighting, since it was a cleaner, safer, easier-to-use form of energy than gas and was also odourless.

In the 1920s, one company revolutionised the electrical sector: Barcelona Traction, Light and Power Company, Ltd., founded by Frederick Stark Pearson on 12 September, 1911, in Toronto, Canada (hence it was more commonly known as La Canadenca, Catalan for

'The Canadian'). The company had Canadian, British and, from 1914, Belgian shareholders and was the first large multinational to set up in Catalonia.

The company's capital came from banks headquartered in London (Canadian Bank of Commerce, Bank of Scotland and Bank of Edinburgh), but it invested its assets in Catalonia. In line with its business model, its main market was Barcelona, where electrical energy was used for lighting, trams and the railways. However, it also operated across the whole of Catalonia, where it began to construct the large networks that would go on to supply the entire Catalan region with electricity.

1.2. Trade Unionism

Catalonia, in the early twentieth century, had approximately two million inhabitants. The period was marked by major rural-urban migration: a workforce that came from rural areas of inland Catalonia and Valencia, Aragon and Murcia descended in great numbers on Catalan cities, where the factories were situated.

The living conditions of workers were characterised by low wages, long working days and poor sanitary conditions at the factories. In this labour context, women and children made up the lowest paid sector of the workforce.

In 1910 the anarchic CNT was created, which soon became the majority trade union. As a result of the First World War, the cost of staples increased, the poor living conditions of the working class were exacerbated, and social tensions led to events such as the revolutionary general strike of 1917 and the women's revolt of 1918.

1.3. The Commonwealth of Catalonia

In the 1920s, the political system of Spain's Bourbon Restoration era had entered into crisis and conservatives and liberals shared power in governments that lasted for an increasingly lower amount of time.

The Commonwealth of Catalonia was created by Royal Decree in 1913 by the government of Eduardo Dato, and thus, between 1914 and 1925, the four Catalan provincial councils joined forces to improve the efficacy of their services and to optimise their resources. The first president of the Commonwealth was Enric Prat de la Riba and, in the wake of his death, he was succeeded by Josep Puig i Cadafalch (who in 1923 had to take up exile due to the anti-Catalan politics of Primo de Rivera). Subsequently, and until the dissolution of the Commonwealth in 1925, it was presided over by Alfons Sala.

The institution implemented a policy of cultural and material modernisation for Catalonia, whose main achievements were reinstating the Catalan language in the official and public domain, creating cultural institutions, building public libraries, and establishing a telephone network and that of other infrastructures. In late 1918, together with Francesc Cambó's Catalan Lliga Regionalista and the Assembly of members of Parliament, the Commonwealth launched its first statute of autonomy project.

2. Strike

CNT leaders were able to attest to the effectiveness of the trade unions approved at the Congress of Sants when, once the Camarasa conflict had begun to unfold, La Canadenca workers initiated a strike against the company that had dominated the energy sector of Catalan industry.

The workers' mobilisation spread from Camarasa to Lleida, Barcelona and other parts of Catalonia and was supported by many workers who had seen their purchasing power slashed during the Spanish Civil War and, at the start of the post-war period, even saw their jobs put into jeopardy.

The company and political authorities were overcome by the effects of the workers' mobilisation. The Sindicat Únic d'Aigua, Gas i Electricitat (Trade Union for Water, Gas and Electricity) left Barcelona in the dark and trams and companies without energy utilities causing them to halt operations. The seizure of La Canadenca, the militarisation of the striking workers, and the declaration of a state of war sparked the persecution of trade unionists and, as a result, prisons began to fill with workers. Finally, however, the need to come to an agreement was recognised.

Reluctance among striking workers to return to work without their imprisoned co-workers being freed precipitated the general strike declaration. In the end, the mobilisation gained an unquestionable victory for the trade unions: the publication of a Decree on an eight-hour day for the whole Spanish state.

2.1. Camarasa

In November 1918, the Camarasa Trade Union-affiliated with the Sindicat Únic de Construccions (Single Construction Workers' Trade Union) of CNT- attained minor labour improvements for the workers building the hydroelectric power plant of La Canadenca in the municipality of Camarasa. On 1 December, however, the construction manager, Mr Caldwell, urged the Guardia Civil to search workers at the site entrance an event that was decisive in triggering the' strike declaration.

The strike had a massive following and the strike committee called for an end to the searches and higher wages. As of 11 December, the committee of the Catalan branch of CNT led the mobilisation, calling chiefly for an eight-hour day and designing the strategy to extend the strike to Lleida and the rest of Catalonia. The trade union also drew up a plan to raise money and thus, offer financial support to strikers, allowing the strike to go on for almost a month and a half.

2.2. Barcelona

A conflict limited to around one hundred workers from the office of Riegos y Fuerza del Ebro put the La Canadenca strike in motion in Barcelona. CNT- with many of its leaders in prison-organised the dispute and managed to get workers from different Companies who were part of the Sindicat Únic d'Aigua, Gas i Electricitat to join the strike. The result was staggering: the city fell into darkness with no energy.

The Spanish state reacted by seizing companies-having been given the green light from their directors-and striking workers were replaced with soldiers from the army who worked to normalise halted services. The militarisation forced employees to return to work, however many refused and were imprisoned. Eventually, political authorities

became involved in the conflict steering it towards negotiation and accord. At the rally held in Les Arenes bull ring, Salvador Seguí managed to convince the workers to return to work.

2.3. The general strike

On 24 March, as a result of a failure to free prisoners, a general strike was declared, supported by workers from many different companies, from electrical enterprises to funerary services. The Captain General of Catalonia, Joaquín Milans del Bosch, declared a state of war, which was enforced by the army, with the help of the civic militiamen, while trying to somehow guarantee the provision of food supplies to the city.

As a consequence of the strike and the strength of the workers' movement, Catalan businesses reacted by ordering a lockout (a work stoppage or company strike and the dismissal of workers) and by persecuting trade unionists .

On 3 April, the Government in Madrid intervened in the conflict in order to ease escalating tensions, issuing the Decree on an eight-hour day, the great triumph of the La Canadenca strike.

3. The long struggle for an eight-hour day

Since the onset of industrialisation, workers have fought to cut excessive working days. During the second half of the nineteenth century, apolitical trade unions in the United States and socialist anarcho-syndicalists in Europe were powerful enough to advance towards an eight-hour day. In 1866, the First International made it a symbol of the demands for working rights for all. The motto 'Eight hours of work, eight of rest and eight hours of leisure' was highly successful.

Demands for eight-hour working days in Catalonia began in the nineteenth century during the First Spanish Republic, a period in which child labour was regulated for the first time. In 1903, the Institut de Reformes Socials (Institute of Social Reform) was created, working to foster regulations on female and child labour and dangerous activities. In 1904, Sunday rest was secured, and on 3 April 1919, thanks to the La Canadenca strike, the Decree on an eight-hour day was finally issued. Thus, due to the pressure exerted in Catalonia, Spain became the first country in Western Europe to make such a breakthrough.