

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: ÁNGEL PESTAÑA'S ENCOUNTER AS CNT DELEGATE WITH THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION IN 1920¹

REINER TOSSTORFF

Source: New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism
Edited by David Berry and Constance Bantman
Cambridge Scholars Publishing

*What happened in Russia? What would I see in this country?
What surprises would await me in this crucible where
capitalism began to be melted down to forge with
the melted material a new social world? What would I see?
Would I succeed in understanding it? I learned much
on this travel and these lessons served my ideas a lot.*
—Ángel Pestaña, *Lo que aprendí en la vida*, Madrid n. d., 126

The visit to Russia by Ángel Pestaña, the delegate of the Spanish syndicalist confederation of labour, CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo), in 1920 ended with one of the early negative political assessments of the development of Soviet Russia. The visit gained its significance from the fact that Pestaña himself made public his impressions after his return. This was to make a decisive contribution to a negative image of the soviet development within international syndicalism and specifically to lead to the break of the CNT with Moscow. He had made a first report on his actions as representative of his organisation, and its introduction was marked “Barcelona prison, November 1921”, but it was probably not published until the beginning of 1922.² This was followed soon afterwards by a more

1 This contribution takes up one aspect of my researches into the history of the Red International of Labour Unions. For details see my book: *Profintern: Die Rote Gewerkschaftsinternationale 1920–1937* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004). Its genesis was shaped by the encounter and the debates between syndicalists and Bolsheviks, in which Pestaña's visit forms just one episode. For a brief survey see also my article “The syndicalist encounter with Bolshevism,” *Anarchist Studies* 2 (2009): 12–28.

2 Ángel Pestaña, *Memoria que al Comité de la Confederación Nacional del Trabajo presenta de su gestión en el II Congreso de la Tercera Internacional el delegado*

analytical text in which he concerned himself with a theoretical discussion of the bases of the Bolshevik revolution.³

Two years later he published two substantially extended and revised books, the first once again an account of his journey but this time foregrounding his experience of everyday life under the revolution and omitting the reports of political meetings, the second once again an analytical text.⁴

This is the basis on which his visit has often been discussed in the scholarly literature, in particular in the classic accounts of the radical left in Spain after 1917 by Meaker, Bar and most recently by Francisco J. Romero Salvadó.⁵ His reports were also republished in the final phase of the Franco dictatorship, at a time when censorship had already formally been lifted—albeit in truncated form, with no indication of the omissions.⁶ Romero Salvadó evidently used the truncated version of Pestaña's first publication, the report of the organisational and political contacts in Moscow, when he translated it into English.⁷

Angel Pestaña (Madrid: F. 3Hxa Cruz, n. d.).

3 Angel Pestaña, *Consideraciones y juicios acerca de la Tercera Internacional (Segunda parte de la Memoria presentada al Comité de la Confederación Nacional del Trabajo)* (Barcelona: n. p., 1922).

4 *Setenta días en Rusia. Lo que yo vi* (Barcelona: Tip. Cosmos, 1924) and *Setenta días en Rusia. Lo que yo pienso* (Barcelona: /ypez, 1924).

5 Gerald H Meaker, *The Revolutionary Left in Spain, 1914–1923* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974); Antonio Bar, *La CNT en los años rojos (Del sindicalismo revolucionario al anarcosindicalismo, 1910–1926)* (Madrid: Akal, 1981), and most recently Francisco J. Romero Salvadó, *The Foundations of Civil War. Revolution, social conflict and reaction in liberal Spain, 1916–1923* (London: Routledge, 2008). Among the numerous further references to Pestaña, the following should be mentioned: Xavier Paniagua, “Las repercusiones de la revolución rusa en el movimiento libertario español,” *Anales del Centro de Alzira de la UNED* 1 (1980): 61–88, esp. 77–81; Maria-Cruz Santos Santos, “La revolució russa i l’anarquisme català. La influència d’Angel Pestaña,” in *Actes. Congrés internacional d’història Catalunya i la restauració*, Manresa, 1, 2 i 3 de maig de 1992 (Manresa: Centre d’estudis del Bages, 1992), 335–338; Juan Avilés Farré, *La fe que vino de Rusia. La revolución bolchevique y los españoles (1917– 1931)* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1999), 153–68.

6 Ángel Pestaña, *Informe de mi estancia en la U.R.S.S. (Documento para la Historia obrera)* (Madrid: ZYX, 1968); Ángel Pestaña, *Consideraciones y juicios acerca de la Tercera Internacional (Segunda parte de la Memoria presentada al Comité de la Confederación Nacional del Trabajo)* (Madrid: ZYX, 1968).

7 “Report on the action taken by the delegate Angel Pestaña at the second congress of the third international which was presented by him to the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo,” *Revolutionary Russia* 1 (1995): 39–103. See also his introduction: “The views of an Anarcho-Syndicalist on the Soviet Union: The defeat of the Third International in Spain,” *ibid.*, 26–38.

What follows is an attempt to retrace Pestaña's time in Moscow within a broader context, taking into consideration the other actors, and that means not least taking account of further eye-witness reports and of archival material. Reasons of space dictate that I here concentrate on a single aspect, the efforts made to create a revolutionary grouping of trade unions, which first led to the formation of the International Trade Union Council and, in the following year, to the foundation of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). It is therefore unfortunately necessary to leave on one side his analyses of the reality of society as a whole in Russia, that is, of the revolutionary process in the country.

Pestaña arrives in Moscow: Negotiating the creation of the International Trade Union Council (June–July 1920)

In the wake of the October Revolution and against the background of the major social and political crisis in Spain, the CNT had at its congress in Madrid in December 1919 decided on membership of the Communist International that had been founded in March in Moscow. But it was not until the spring of 1920 that it was possible to dispatch a representative, Ángel Pestaña, who had been one of the most important spokesmen of the CNT in its stronghold, Barcelona, during the great struggles from 1917 onwards.⁸

He reached Moscow at the end of June, where the most varied foreign visitors had already arrived in this new 'Mecca of world revolution'. In addition, several of them were, like Pestaña, directly representative of organisations and had mandates for participation in the Second Congress of the Communist International, which had been called for mid-July. But what had not been known in Spain was that the Bolsheviks had already also had discussions with foreign trade union representatives—from Great Britain and Italy. These had resulted in an initially very vaguely formulated declaration of intent to form an international revolutionary trade union centre. There was not even any clarity about the concrete organisational form it was to take, but it was to form an alternative to the reformist (i.e. in its leadership social democratic) International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), known from its headquarters as the Amsterdam International.⁹

8 On Ángel Pestaña, 1886 to 1937, watchmaker by profession, see the collection of essays with a substantial introduction by Antonio Elorza: *Ángel Pestaña, Trayectoria sindicalista* (Madrid: Tebas, 1974), and also the biography A. M. de Lera, *Ángel Pestaña. Retrato de un anarquista* (Barcelona: Argos, 1978).

9 For its history see Geert van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International: The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (Aldershot:

The meetings which Pestaña now joined were partly informal, as far as the discussions of a trade union alternative with the syndicalist representatives were concerned, and partly formal, as regards the preparation of the Comintern Congress in its Executive Committee. In the process, differences emerged not only between syndicalists and communists but also within the ranks of the syndicalists. That being said, the syndicalists were to be united by their aversion to any kind of subordination of trade unions to party leadership (or the Communist International) just as they were by a mistrust of Bolshevik demands for a “dictatorship of the proletariat” and for the tactic of factional work within the reformist trade unions.

For Pestaña the starting point was marked by the session of the Executive Committee of the Comintern on June 28, where he began by taking up the mandate to which the CNT was entitled as a result of its declaration of membership.¹⁰ On the agenda was a manifesto concerning the creation of an alternative to Amsterdam, presented by the Bolshevik trade union leader Alexander Lozovsky.¹¹ It was the result of discussions with the representatives of the Italian confederation of trade unions.

Lozovsky’s statement gave rise to the expected objections and protests of the syndicalists. The British shop stewards delegate Jack Tanner objected to a passage according to which revolutionaries should not leave the reformist trade unions. In this he also gained support from the German anarcho-syndicalist Augustin Souchy and from Pestaña. But while Tanner merely insisted that the dictatorship of the proletariat should not be limited exclusively to the Communist Party and wanted trade union organisations to be granted equal rights within it, Souchy and Pestaña, on whom anarchism had left its mark, rejected the idea on principle. Similarly the idea of

Ashgate, 2006). For the international politics of syndicalism, which was in part active as a kind of revolutionary current within the ranks of the IFTU but predominantly stood for an organisational alternative, see Wayne Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves’. Syndicalism and International Labour: The Origins of the International Working Men’s Association, 1913–1923* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989).

¹⁰ Information about the course of events at this Executive Committee session are to be found in Pestaña, *Memoria*, 23–33, and in the diary of the French socialist (and future PCF leader) Marcel Cachin, *Carnets 1906–1947*, vol. 2: 1917–1920 (Paris: CNRS, 1993), 506–511. There are also references in Alfred Rosmer, *Lenin’s Moscow* (London: Pluto, 1971), 38f., and it is mentioned in a chronology of the Moscow discussions assembled by Jack Tanner, the delegate of the British shop stewards: “A Brief Summary of Discussions & Negotiations re Industrial Red International,” *Jack Tanner Papers*, Nuffield College Oxford University, Box 6, File 2, 59–62.

¹¹ See in this context my brief biography “Alexander Lozovsky: Sketch of a Bolshevik Career,” *Socialist History* 34 (March 2009): 1–19.

subordinating the revolutionary trade union movement to political leadership provoked their opposition.

This led to fierce counter-arguments. The syndicalists, it was said, comprised in many cases only minority organisations. And there were strong demands that the dictatorship of the proletariat and the hegemony of the Party should be accepted. In view of the violent collision of the arguments, the Bolshevik speakers made an effort not to deepen the divisions and called for the cooperation of the various strands of the revolutionary workers' movement. They insisted that it was wrong to separate Party and trade unions as the opportunists of the Second International had done. Moreover there seemed to be evidence that more and more syndicalists were accepting the necessity for political action. Further debate of the text was in the end postponed for a special discussion.

This however showed that the discussion was going round in circles. Tanner called the process "usual procedure". All the same, Lozovsky had to give way to Pestaña on one point when the latter protested—as he had done earlier—against a sentence in the text which said that the apolitical (ie. syndicalist) trade union leaders had during the war become the lackeys of imperialism. He had to agree that that did not apply to the CNT, nor to the corresponding trade unions of Portugal and South America. There was thus agreement at least that this passage should be altered.¹² Pestaña, it is true, then declared that, despite the objections he had voiced, he felt committed to the resolution of the CNT in favour of membership and would add his vote to a majority decision. However they would be sure to discuss all the arguments once again after his return.¹³

Despite the proposals for compromise that were made, e.g. by the British shop stewards,¹⁴ the discussions had evidently run into the sand. Finally, on July 1, a large number of the delegates, in particular those from France and Italy, but also including Pestaña, set off on a tour of Russia under the guidance of Lozovsky. It was not until two weeks later that they returned to Moscow.¹⁵

12 See Pestaña, *Memoria*, 36f. He speaks there of an "unforgivable disloyalty" on the grounds that that had not been carried out, in particular because on the occasion of the final resolution in the middle of July he had returned to the matter and Lozovsky had explicitly assured him that the change had been inserted (39). Here, however, he was mistaken, as well as on other details, for Lozovsky certainly did make a corresponding amendment to the text. (A. Losowski, *Der Internationale Rat der Fach- und Industrieverbände [Moskau gegen Amsterdam]* (Berlin: Seehof, 1920), 74. Rosmer, *Lenin's Moscow*, 50, also mentions this intervention by Pestaña, which he supported.

13 See Pestaña, *Memoria*, 35f.

14 Tanner Papers, Box 6, File 2, Sheet 71.

15 See here Cachin, *Carnets*, vol. 2, 13–555, which reproduce impressions of the various visits as well as discussions with other delegates, and Pestaña, *Lo que yo vi*,

But despite the absence of most of those involved, the preparatory work continued. This is shown by a note of Lenin's, which he composed in the first half of July.¹⁶ But as far as the political and organisational principles were concerned, things had begun to go the Bolshevik way. After his return, on July 14, Lozovsky made a report to the soviet trade union leadership,¹⁷ and there was widespread agreement that it was impossible to reach a common platform with the syndicalist opponents of the dictatorship of the proletariat.¹⁸

Once again the trade union delegates met.¹⁹ Lozovsky announced that since no result had yet been achieved the decision had been taken that only those organisations could speak that had already officially joined the Comintern (i.e. those from Russia, Yugoslavia, Italy, Georgia, Bulgaria, France and Spain). Lozovsky explained to Pestaña that his amendment concerning the attitude of the syndicalist trade unions in the World War had been incorporated. But when the latter again proposed the deletion of the passage about the dictatorship of the proletariat and taking power Lozovsky explained to him that he could make no further concessions on this matter.

As far as the statutes and regulations of the Council were concerned, the majority of the provisions (not all were in the form of resolutions) were not contentious. And there was agreement on the timing of a congress. Disagreement remained with regard to the place. While Pestaña introduced Sweden or Italy into the discussion, Lozovsky proposed Russia since Russian delegates were unable to travel to other countries. With that argument he finally won the day. There were also major clashes over the decision that only trade unions that were in favour of the dictatorship of the proletariat could take part in the congress. Pestaña objected that this was to give too narrow a political framework for possible participants. The aim, he said, was for as many as possible to take part, including those who had other views on this subject. But here too he remained in a minority. So, on July 15 1920²⁰ the International Trade Union Council was founded, and that meant in practice a new trade union international in opposition to the IFTU.

The founding declaration²¹ began with a long preamble in which the premises of the foundation of the Council were sketched out. The position

43–59.

16 *Leninskii sbornik*, vol. XXXVII (Moscow: Politizdat, 1970), 220f.

17 *Otchet VTsSPS (Mart 1920g.-Aprel' 1921g.)* (Moscow: V.Ts.S.P.S., 1921), 199.

18 Thus the soviet trade union leader Mikhail Tomsky in his report to the meeting of the communist faction in the Central Council of Trade Unions on Oct. 16, 1920 (*M. Tomskii, Stat'i i rechi*, vol. 6, [Moscow: V.Ts.S.P.S., 1928], 52–73, here 60f.).

19 See here Pestaña, *Memoria*, 38–40.

20 The date according to Losowski, *Der Internationale Rat*, 61, and *Bericht des Internationalen Rates der roten Fach- und Industrieverbände für die Zeit vom 15. Juli 1920 – 1. Juli 1921* (Moscow: Pressbureau des I. Kongresses der Roten Gewerkschaften: 1921), 22.

of the proletariat since the end of the War, it said, demanded an ever clearer leadership of the proletariat. The struggle must be engaged internationally in the context of industrial instead of craft unions. Mere reforms could not resolve the situation. In the War the majority of trade union leaders who had up to then declared themselves to be politically neutral or apolitical had become supporters of imperialism. It was the duty of the working class to bring together the trade unions into a revolutionary confederation and work hand in hand with the political organisations. The dictatorship of the bourgeoisie must be countered by the dictatorship of the proletariat, which alone was able to break the resistance of capitalism. The IFTU was incapable of realising all these principles.

Three conclusions followed from this. First, there was decisive condemnation of any withdrawal from the reformist trade unions. Rather, the “opportunists” should be driven out of the trade unions. Second, communist cells should be formed in all trade unions. Finally, it was necessary to form an International Trade Union Council from the affiliated member associations “in order to lead the process of revolutionising the trade union movement” and this would act in close cooperation with the Comintern—which was expressed in mutual representation on the Trade Union Council and the Comintern Executive Committee.

This declaration also bore the signature of Pestaña for the CNT, corresponding to the decision in favour of membership, to which he felt bound.

Pestaña at the Second Comintern Congress (19 July–7 August 1920)²²

In the meantime the meeting of the Comintern Congress took place, attended by Pestaña, together with numerous other syndicalists, as an official delegate of the CNT and the only person from the whole of Spain.

There was already a clash over the first item on the agenda, which concerned the role of the Communist Party.²³ While Grigory Zinovev, who was giving the report on this question, emphasised the necessity of a revolutionary party, Pestaña, Tanner and Souchy declared it redundant.

21 Reprinted with minor variations as a result of different translations in Losowski, *Der Internationale Rat*, 58–60 and 74f., and *Bericht des Internationalen Rates*, 21f.

22 For the course of events at the Congress see *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!* Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920, ed. John Riddell, 2 vols. (New York: Pathfinder, 1991).

23 The discussion can be found in: *Workers of the World*, vol. 1, 143–78; and a brief account with a report on his line of argument in Pestaña, *Memoria*, 49–56.

Revolutionary trade unions, they said, were the essential instruments of the class struggle. The bourgeoisie was aware of that and was for that reason particularly harsh in its persecution of the syndicalists. Lenin and Trotsky attempted in their replies to build bridges to the syndicalists by saying that the latter's idea of the active role of the "determined minorities" was not very different from the Bolshevik conception of the communist avant-garde party. They misunderstood the term "party" because they only ever associated it with the conception of socialdemocratic parliamentary parties.

On the suggestion of the chair of the Congress a commission was then appointed to revise the theses that had been presented, but significantly without a syndicalist spokesman.²⁴ It can have been no surprise when their unanimous acceptance was announced on the following day, and this was repeated in the plenary session.²⁵ This may sound surprising since the syndicalist representatives had a vote here; unfortunately the minutes of the session provide no explanation, but the syndicalists may well have followed Pestaña in abstaining (which was however not recorded in the minutes). He justified this in his report to the CNT by saying that this was a party-political matter whose discussion was of no concern to him. Only on the question of trade unions did he take part in the vote.²⁶

But for this the discussion was first transferred to a commission, over whose composition there was a further clash between Pestaña and the chair of the Congress, who insisted on his authority to make the decision. As far as Pestaña was concerned, this was a further sign of a 'culture of organisation' that was alien to the—Spanish—syndicalists.²⁷ In the event prominent syndicalists—namely Pestaña and Tanner (Souchy had just an advisory vote)—were to be found in the trade union commission.²⁸

This is not the place to retrace the whole sequence of debates. Those in the plenary sessions at least are available in published form in the proceedings.²⁹ Suffice it to observe that there were head-on collisions in the commission. One point of contention was the question of the leadership of the trade unions by the party and of revolutionary work in the broad reformist trade unions instead of the creation of independent revolutionary (minority) organisations. But already here the Bolshevik line won the day.³⁰ But what made things particularly difficult for Pestaña was that the syndicalist opposition now came mainly from English-speaking delegates.

24 *Workers of the World*, vol. 1, 178.

25 Zinoviev's report on the commission and the theses, *ibid.*, 182–200.

26 See Pestaña, *Memoria*, 63f.

27 *Ibid.*, 55–57.

28 An overview of the composition of the commissions in: *Workers of the World*, vol. 2, 844f.

29 *Workers of the World*, vol. 2, 590–625.

30 See Pestaña's account, *Memoria*, 64–67.

The Congress had originally wanted to conduct debates only in German and French, but now it was mainly English that was spoken, with no translation into French. This was a disaster for Pestaña, since he only spoke French. His sole intervention on this agenda item was therefore merely a protest. He did not want to vote without a translation.³¹ In the end, after renewed discussion by the commission with numerous minor amendments, the resolution was accepted with a large majority. Pestaña's laconic comment: "I did not want to vote. For what reason!"³²

The International Trade Union Council becomes organised (August 1920)

Shortly before the end of the Comintern Congress Lozovsky invited those signatories of the July 15 call for its foundation who were still in Moscow to begin on the task of organising the Trade Union Council, and involving the syndicalist representatives who had not yet become members. Right at the beginning of the meeting of August 6³³ there developed a clash between Pestaña and Lozovsky when the latter referred again to the resolutions of the Comintern Congress concerning the subordination of the trade unions to the leadership of the Comintern. Pestaña insisted that the CNT was not in agreement with such requirements for the restriction of trade union autonomy. Lozovsky responded by proposing to leave the final decision to a broad, truly representative congress. Everyone should work towards convening it. Pestaña, too, declared himself ready to join in.

Lozovsky first presented the soviet trade union leader Mikhail Tomsky as the real soviet representative in the Trade Union Council. Even if he lacked Lozovsky's international experience, the impression he made, for example on Pestaña, was more positive. "Tomsky showed himself from the

31 *Workers of the World*, vol. 1, 421. In his report to the CNT Pestaña once more complained bitterly about this (*Memoria*, 61): "From this moment on (...) there were whole sessions where not one translation into French was made." These translation problems seem to lie behind a sequence of inaccuracies, confusions and mistakes on the part of Pestaña. Thus he says emphatically that the famous "21 conditions of membership" never existed, these had consisted only of a few points. "With hand on heart I can say that the Congress did not discuss them." Only on his way back to Berlin did he hear of them, he says. (*Memoria*, 61)

32 Pestaña, *Memoria*, 67; *Workers of the World*, vol. 2, 709–28. The theses themselves were for some obscure reason published earlier in the proceedings, 625–34.

33 The minutes in the RILU collection in the Comintern archive in Moscow: RGASPI 534/3/2/1. An account in Pestaña, *Memoria*, 69–71.

first moment to be more conciliatory than Lozovsky.”³⁴ Perhaps this was merely because the clashes over the preparation of the founding declaration were past. In any case Tomsky showed signs of readiness for compromise when it came to questions that were of special importance for the syndicalists.

One of these concerned the place where the conference that was to be called should meet. Pestaña responded with Italy or Sweden when Tomsky proposed Moscow. Tomsky declared himself prepared to investigate. Admittedly there are no signs of any investigation in the archives of the RILU.

It was not until the following session on August 11 that the selection of the Bureau took place, consisting of Tomsky, the Frenchman Rosmer and one still to be nominated representative of the Comintern, with Tomsky as General Secretary.³⁵ Perhaps the most significant thing about this session was the introduction of measures to heal the breach with those syndicalists and industrialists that had refused to be involved with the Council. It was agreed to invite to the congress all the trade unions whose views were close and at least declared their support for revolutionary class struggle. This was the basis on which Tomsky and Pestaña were to speak to the representatives who were still in Russia. Finally an ambitious plan was worked out to encourage delegates to be sent to the planned congress. Thus Pestaña was to compose a call addressed to the workers of the Iberian peninsula and Latin America.³⁶ It was also agreed to produce a bulletin in four languages and to publish pamphlets.

However the existing contradictions immediately became evident again when the representative of the Italian syndicalists, Armando Borghi of the *Unione sindacale italiana* (USI), arrived very late. The USI had joined the Comintern in 1919, like the CNT, but now wanted to belong to the Trade Union Council as well, whereas the left-reformist *Confederazione Generale del Lavoro* (CGL) was the official co-founder. The USI now claimed the right to be sole representative of Italy.³⁷ But this claim to exclusivity, which was supported by Pestaña, failed, as did his proposal that the Council should create a bond of political solidarity with the USI. But at least the USI was now for the first time a fully fledged member.

Things moved more slowly on the other hand when it came to the attempt to address calls to the workers of the various countries. Pestaña’s

34 Pestaña, *Memoria*, 71f.

35 The minutes in RGASPI 534/3/2/2. An account in Pestaña, *Memoria*, 72.

36 *Ibid.*, 76.

37 In addition to the information in the minutes of the two sessions which dealt with the USI question—RGASPI 534/3/2/3f.—see also Pestaña, *Memoria*, 73–76, and the various accounts by Borghi, reprinted in Maurizio Antonioli, *Armando Borghi e l'Unione Sindacale Italiana* (Manduria: Lacaita, 1990), 302–05 and 311–19.

commission was renewed. But in his report too he simply refers to it, without explaining why he had not carried it out by the time he left.³⁸

The growing tensions between the “intransigent” syndicalists and the communists were then to lead to a dramatic climax when it came to the question of adopting further calls. Since their final formulation was only worked out after the session it was decided that they would be circulated for signing.³⁹ Pestaña received from one of Tomsky’s messengers a manifesto with several carbon copies. Among these papers there was however an additional document that had not previously been discussed “on the organisation of propaganda”. It provided for the establishment of propaganda bureaux in every country. What provoked the protest of the syndicalists was the requirement that these bureaux should work closely with the communist party, that the elections should admittedly take place at conferences of revolutionary trade unionists, but that the Party should approve them. Pestaña had even at first signed this document by mistake. But when his attention had been drawn to it by Borghi and Souchy he immediately withdrew his signature. They all protested in the strongest terms, which the messenger had to communicate to Tomsky. Interestingly, this document is missing in the RILU archives. According to the surviving minutes it was not even discussed at a session of the Trade Union Council or its Bureau. There is nevertheless no reason to doubt this account.

According to Pestaña’s record of events this incident was the immediate reason why he and Borghi hastened their departure from Russia, which then took place a few days later at the end of August or beginning of September. The breach between Bolsheviks and syndicalists which had been so laboriously patched up was thus opened up again. After the return of the various delegates to their home countries there began an intensive debate in the different organisations about their relationship towards the Trade Union Council and about sending delegates to the planned international congress.

Pestaña’s return and the path of the CNT from Moscow to Berlin (1921/22)

The meeting in Moscow in the summer of 1920 was, if in an unintentional and completely informal way, the first international discussion

38 Pestaña, *Memoria*, 76f.

39 This incident is—with minor variations—recounted in Pestaña, *Memoria*, 77– 81, as also in his further report *Consideraciones y juicios*, 27f., and by Borghi, e.g. reprinted in Antonioli, *Armando Borghi*, 318f.. The document was then published—with the deleted signature of Pestaña—in: *Sempre!* Almanacco No. 2 (1923) di ‘Guerra di Classe’, 136.

between syndicalists since the London Congress of 1913.⁴⁰ The delegates of the various organisations would meet in Pestaña's room in the delegates' hotel and discuss their attitude⁴¹ while the Bolsheviks courted them intensively. It was almost obligatory to make visits to Lenin, who sought close contact with the syndicalists.⁴² But this charm offensive was to have no effect on a substantial section of the syndicalists.

The reports that were published after the delegates' return to the West played an important part in the rejection of cooperation with the Bolsheviks. In the case of Pestaña things were complicated. In the middle of October he returned from Russia first to Berlin for extensive discussions with the leadership of the German syndicalists and then proceeded to Italy. Arrested in Milan, he was deported to Spain two months later. Arrested again after his arrival in Barcelona in the middle of December, he spent the whole of 1921 in prison, where he wrote the reports referred to at the beginning of this paper.⁴³

It was thus only after more than a year that he was able to publish an account of the events of his travels and to reach an explicitly negative verdict on his experiences with the Bolsheviks.⁴⁴ In this connection it is no longer possible to be sure whether he reached this conclusion only through lengthy reflection in the 'relative peace' of the prison, or whether that was his attitude immediately on his return. For the impression had at first arisen that he had returned from Moscow with enthusiasm. This, for example, is what was reported by one of the most important leaders of the Catalan CNT, Salvador Seguí, in a newspaper interview following a discussion.⁴⁵

This delay played a considerable part in ensuring that the participation of the CNT and USI in the International Trade Union Congress that took place in Moscow in 1921, ie. the founding congress of the RILU, was uncontentious. On the contrary, since it was now a question of a revolutionary trade union international instead of a party international, the sending of delegates in the spring of 1921 actually gained a great deal of support.

Admittedly there were a number of points on which the CNT delegation were part of a syndicalist minority at the founding congress of the RILU,

40 Wayne Westergard-Thorpe, "Towards a Syndicalist International: The 1913 London Congress," *International Review of Social History* 1 (1978): 33–78.

41 Antonioli, Armando Borghi, 307.

42 For Pestaña's visit see his account in *Lo que yo vi*, 191–198.

43 In addition to a number of references in Pestaña's texts, see Meaker, *The Revolutionary Left*, 298f.

44 Borghi did not publish any such detailed accounts as Pestaña but gave only a single report to the USI, which was printed in their periodical in October, 1921. (He also wrote about the events decades later in his memoirs).

45 Bar, *La CNT*, 613.

but the end result was that it supported the new organisation. Subsequently there was strong dissent, especially on the part of the anarchists, but also coming from the 'pure' syndicalists, who rejected cooperation with 'politicians'. In the autumn of 1921 they went on the offensive. Against the background of the general situation of the CNT, which was characterised by severe persecution, they would soon succeed in turning their minority into a majority. In this the publication of Pestaña's reports played a decisive role.

In June 1922 a conference of the CNT met in Saragossa, at a time when the repression was temporarily somewhat relaxed. After controversial reports on the course of the RILU founding congress it was particularly the appearance of Pestaña that made an impression. Building on his experiences in the summer of 1920, he now turned definitively against the Comintern and its 'trade union international'. The overwhelming majority was agreed that disagreement over questions of principle meant that there was a gulf between the RILU and the CNT. Membership of the Comintern had been, it was said, more a question of sympathy with the revolution than agreement with Bolshevik principles. But since this had been decided on at the congress of 1919 and so could not be revoked simply by a conference, it was decided to suspend relations and pass the final decision on for discussion in the individual trade union organisations. But there was no doubt about the mood at the base. In practice a breach had taken place. The CNT was now to play a decisive role in the efforts to create an independent syndicalist international, which indeed—with anarchist influence—came into being as the International Working Men's Association at a conference in Berlin at the end of 1922.

Pestaña had thereby made an important contribution to the final rejection of the Bolshevik revolution by a significant section of the syndicalists and thus to the development of anarcho-syndicalism. Not only had the theoretical and political concepts that he had put forward in Moscow shown themselves to be irreconcilable with those of the Bolsheviks (and of the Communist International as a whole). There was also his concrete experience of the reality of the Russian Revolution in the face of the unrealised promises and above all in the face of the increasing repression, especially of the Russian anarchists and syndicalists. But more than anything else this concerned his concrete organisational experience of the attempts to form a trade union international. No doubt his difficulties with a country and a language that he did not know played their part. This explains some misunderstandings in his reports. And he too will have been affected by the atmosphere of the milieu in which he moved, only to distance himself more clearly from it when he gained physical distance. But even if only one aspect of his experiences could be the subject of analysis here, namely the organisational and political level, and, for example, all his observations and analyses on the general situation of workers and peasants

had to be omitted for reasons of space, it is evident that there were no matters of principle on which agreement could have been found. This could not fail to have consequences for the organisation on whose behalf Pestaña had travelled to Russia.

Table des matières

Pestaña arrives in Moscow: Negotiating the creation of the International Trade Union Council (June–July 1920).....	3
Pestaña at the Second Comintern Congress (19 July–7 August 1920).....	7
The International Trade Union Council becomes organised (August 1920).....	9
Pestaña's return and the path of the CNT from Moscow to Berlin (1921/22).....	11