

Bolten, Virginia 1870-1960?



A short biography of Virginia Bolten, aka the Louise Michel of Rosario, fearless fighter for anarchism and women's liberation

Virginia Bolten was the daughter of a German street vendor. She was born in Uruguay, either in San Luis, according to some, or in San Juan, according to the researcher Placido Grela. Rosario was known as the “Barcelona of Argentina” at this point in time because of its concentration of industries, the radical ferment there and the political influence it had over the rest of the country. She worked making shoes for workers and then later in the Refineria, the huge sugar factory that employed thousands of workers, many of them European immigrants and many of them women. She married Marquez, an organiser of a shoe workers union and a fellow Uruguayan.

In 1888 the bakery workers paper *El Obrero Panadero* of Rosario became one of the first voices of anarchism in Argentina, with many bakery workers attracted to anarchist ideas. It had a key role in organising the first May Day demonstrations in 1890. Activists like Virginia Bolten and Francisco Berri appear to have been associated with it. In 1889 she helped organise the seamstresses’ strike in Rosario, believed to be the first strike of women workers in Argentina.

Anarchists and socialists whether French, Italian, Spanish or German language had started meeting at the La Bastilla (The Bastille Café) among them French and German internationalists and the Catalan Paulino Pallas. Virginia frequented this café and it was one of the places where the plans to celebrate May Day were hatched. Among other anarchists who contributed to discussions there were Romulo Ovidi, Francisco Berri, Domingo Lodi,

Juan Ibaldi, Rafael Torrent, Teresa Marchisio and Maria Calvia (who were both later involved in setting up *La Voz de la Mujer* and its paper with Virginia). The day before the demonstration Virginia was detained by the police for distributing leaflets outside the Refineria. Not to be deterred she was at the head of a march of thousands of workers which proceeded to the main square of Montevideo, the Plaza Lopez, on the First of May. She carried a large red flag with black lettering proclaiming: "Primero de Mayo - Fraternidad Universal" (First Of May- Universal Fraternity). At the Plaza Lopez her fiery speech entranced the crowd. She is credited as being the first woman in Argentina to address a workers rally (it should be borne in mind that she was twenty years old at the time). Juana Buena, in her autobiography *Historia de una ideal vivido por una mujer*, remembered the strength and tenacity of Virginia in propagating anarchist ideas including in the pages of the anarchist papers *La Protesta Humana* and *La Protesta* and especially in *La Voz de la Mujer*, (*Woman's Voice* (1896-1897)). This was a paper which explicitly described itself as anarchist communist, with a subtitle Dedicated to the advancement of anarchist communism. It was the first publication edited by women for women in the whole of Latin America, fusing class struggle anarchist ideas with the liberation of women. It was supported by the meagre wages of Virginia and her women comrades in the shoe and sugar industries. It was an anarchist publication that was typical of the period, small and ephemeral and semi-clandestine. Its descriptive sub-title summed it all up: *Appears when it can*. Only nine issues appeared, although it is believed that Virginia edited another issue in Montevideo. Issues 1-4 had a print run of one thousand copies, which went up to two thousand for the following four issues whilst the last appearance of the paper merited a print run of 1,500.

La Voz de la Mujer published many articles from Spanish anarchists on the subject of the liberation of women. Contributors included the great anarchist organiser Teresa Claramunt, Soledad Gustavo, etc. The support of Emma Goldman and Louise Michel was actively sought and secured. It deplored the action of the anarchist F. Denanbride in shooting his lover five times because she was leaving him. This woman, Anita Lagouardette, was a contributor to *La Voz de la Mujer* and miraculously survived the attack. *La Voz de la Mujer* railed against the hypocrisy in male anarchist ranks where freedom was denied to women: "When we women, unworthy and ignorant as we are, took the initiative and published *La Voz de la Mujer*, we should have known, Oh modem rogues, how you would respond with your old mechanistic philosophy to our initiative. You should have realized that we stupid women have initiative and that is the product of thought. You know - we also think . . . The first number of *La Voz de la Mujer* appeared and of course, all hell broke loose: 'Emancipate women? For what?' 'Emancipate women? Not on your nelly!' . . . 'Let our emancipation come first, and then, when we men are emancipated and free, we shall see about yours.'"

Virginia undertook speaking tours throughout Argentina speaking at meetings in San Nicolás, Campana, Tandil, Mendoza and many other towns. The police intervened on many occasions to stop her speaking. Her main topics were the situation of the working class and in particular the various oppressions suffered by working class women. In November 1900 she and Teresa Marchisio organised a counter procession against the parade of the Catholic establishment in Rosario, the procession of the Virgen de la Roca. She and Teresa were arrested with four other anarchists.

In the same year she was actively involved in the setting up of the Casa del Pueblo (the House of the People) with other anarchists. This housed political, social and cultural events with many conferences, debates, discussions, poetry readings and theatre pieces; it had an orchestra and a library of 380 books. She was one of the speakers at its inauguration. On the 20th October 1901 she was arrested for distributing anarchist propaganda outside the gates of the Refineria in the course of a strike. During this incident, she witnessed the cold blooded murder of the immigrant worker Come Budislavich by the police. She helped set up an

anarchist women's group with other anarchist militants like Lopez and Teresa Deloso that year.

In 1902 she was one of the main speakers at the First of May rally in Montevideo using it as an occasion to denounce the situation in Argentina. In 1904 she was forced to move to Buenos Aires where she was active in the Comité de Huelga Femenino, (Women's Strike Committee) which with the Federación Obrera Argentina organised the women workers in the port fruit market of Buenos Aires and brought them out on strike. Her intensive activity began to effect her health. The comrades of the anarchist theatre group Germinal issued an appeal to all libertarian groups, unions and societies to take part in a benefit to aid her. The great Italian anarchist Pietro Gori introduced her to anarchist intellectual circles in Buenos Aires and helped her found an organisation of anarchists and socialists focussed on attacking legal marriage and other authoritarian concepts.

The failure of the civil-military uprising of Hipolito Irigoyen against the conservative government in 1905 was used as a pretext to attack the workers movement. Despite the fact that the anarchist movement had no kind of alliance with Irigoyen its principal activists were arrested, prosecuted and even deported. Virginia was arrested along with her partner and detained for two days. Marquez was expelled to Uruguay under the new Residency Law.

In 1907 she was one of the initiators of the Centro Femenino Anarquista (Anarchist Women's Centre) and through it was one of the principal organisers of the tenants strike of that year. Following her speech during this strike, the Residency Law was used to deport her to Montevideo in Uruguay, where she was reunited with Marquez and their young children. She was the first woman to be deported under this law.

Her home in Montevideo became an operational base for the anarchist exiles deported from Argentina. In Montevideo she collaborated with Juana Buena in 1909 in the anarchist feminist newspaper La Nueva Senda (The New Path) (1909-1910). The same year she was involved in the international agitation around the trial and execution of the Spanish anarchist educationalist Francisco Ferrer. This was linked up with the brutal repression of demonstrators in Buenos Aires on the 1st May in Buenos Aires in the same year. At the hour on which Ferrer was executed in Barcelona on 13th October a large demonstration of more than ten thousand people organised by workers organisations, anarchists, socialists and liberals, with the participation of many students and university teachers ended in the main square of Montevideo, the Plaza Constitución. Here it was addressed by a host of speakers, among them Virginia and her fellow anarchist Juana Buena. In the repression which followed she was one of the anarchists most harassed by the authorities, along with others like Juana Buena and María Collazo.

In early April 1911 she was involved in the setting up in Montevideo of the Asociación Femenina- Emancipación she which sought to unite all anticlerical women in Montevideo. She and María Collazo were influential in this organisation. It appealed to working class women and held its meetings at the offices of the Electrical Workers Union. It made strong efforts to organise among telephone operators, at this time made up mostly of native women workers. It rejected the overtures of the reformist Pan-American Federation, Virginia speaking out against appeals for female suffrage.

All of the above was a remarkable life achievement for the cause of anarchism. Unfortunately she was to be involved in an episode referred to as "Anarcobatllismo" which caused the first important rift within the anarchist movement in Uruguay. She and other anarchists like Francisco Berri, Adrian Zamboni, Orsini Bertani, and Clerici organised around the anarchist communist paper Idea Libre began to give critical support to the regime of President Batlle y Ordóñez. During his second term in office in Uruguay Batlle initiated a huge reform programme. This was not just far-reaching for Latin America but on an international level. He separated Church from State, banned crucifixes in hospitals, removed references to God

and the Bible from public oaths, gave widespread rights to unions and political parties and organisations, brought in the eight hour day and universal suffrage, introduced unemployment benefits, legalised divorce, created more high schools, promised and practised no residency laws against exiled anarchists and other radicals, opened universities to women, and led a campaign to take away the control of industry and land from foreign capitalists (the British capitalists had huge influence in Uruguay) and nationalised private monopolies. This seems to have disoriented some elements in the anarchist movement, Virginia included. In the process sections of the Uruguayan anarchist movement were neutralised. The emerging Socialist Party had supported Emancipacion but now turned against it. Their paper El Socialista attacked Virginia in July 1913, reproducing alleged statements from her in which she praised Batlle as ‘progressive’ and ‘unlike anything we have ever had in this country’. By the end of the year El Socialista had heightened its critical tone, insisting that Virginia and her associates had betrayed the workers’ movement, that workers reorganise their movement and “send anarchism to the devil”. This brought about the collapse of Emancipacion and the working class women’s movement in Uruguay, as well as doing damage to the anarchist movement and bringing about the ascendancy of the Socialist Party.

In 1923 she was involved in the setting up of the Centro Internacional de Estudios Sociales (a libertarian literary association) in Montevideo and in the same year spoke at the 1st May rally in Montevideo. I have little information on the later years of Virginia Bolten. Any further information would be very much appreciated. It appears that she continued to live in the working class district of Manga in Montevideo until her death in around 1960 and that she remained attached to anarchist ideas.

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