

# Niños in the North East and Cumbria

Below is a summary of a talk given by Don Watson at the AGM of the North East Labour History Society, Newcastle upon Tyne, on 25 May 2005.

Around 400 Basque children were looked after in the North East of England and Cumbria, most of them for up to two years. Some stayed at Brampton near Carlisle, in "The Larches" on the Allendale Road in Hexham, Northumberland, and at 40 Percy Park in Tynemouth. Another colony was at Hutton Hall near Guisborough in Cleveland. About half of them were taken care of by the Catholic Church in children's homes and convents in Newcastle-on-Tyne, Carlisle, Spennymoor and Darlington.

The biggest single colony was at Brampton, within the constituency of Wilfred Roberts M.P. – a prominent member of the Basque Children's Committee and committed supporter of the Spanish Republic. The children were put up in an old workhouse converted by local trades unions and church members. It accommodated up to 60 children, who must have had an impact on the small town. Elsewhere sympathisers let out properties to the local Basque Children's Committees: large houses in residential areas in Hexham and Tynemouth, and Hutton Hall was a small stately home in its own grounds.

The hostel at Hexham had to close after a few months due to lack of local financial support: there was some political opposition to the Basque evacuation in the town, which was prosperous and with little labour movement influence. This was in marked contrast to the hostel at Percy Park Tynemouth. Here Nell Badsey, the hostel manager, cleverly countered initial opposition by some local residents by using the local press to describe what the children had gone through at home and the amount of local support she was getting for them. The boys here took a full part in local football and sports events through the Scouts and the YMCA, so that after a year a newspaper described them as having settled in so well they were "as much a part of the area as Percy Park itself".

Len Edmondson, a member of the Independent Labour Party in 1937 and involved with the hostel in Tynemouth, recalls that the Basque children's supporters often had a hard job to convince the public that the children were not getting a penny from the British government. Just the opposite: all the money for food, coal, clothing, and everything else had to be raised through the efforts of the local



volunteers. Apart from Hexham these efforts were successful, because the sources of financial and other support for the colonies were many and varied. In North Shields for example, the Methodist Ladies Sisterhood performed plays to raise funds, and Nell Badsey, manager of the hostel in Tynemouth, was always full of praise for the consistent funding she received from the Northumberland and Durham miners' lodges. Supporters in the local committees included local clergy, trades unionists, and political activists from the Liberals to the Communists, frequently people involved in other areas of Republican solidarity work. They also included humanitarian people with no background in any political causes.

The colony committees encouraged the children to exhibit their traditional music, song and dance, frequently in national costume, at fund-raising concerts and meetings or simply at village occasions and other local events. Some of the children were present at political meetings too: they were on the platform at the Newcastle May Day rally in 1938, supporting Labour and Communist speakers at an International Brigade memorial meeting in Blyth Miners Welfare Hall, and on the platform in Bedlington, where Labour MPs attacked the British government for supporting non-intervention. In this way, true to the trades union and Republican sympathies of their parents, the presence of the children was part of the political campaign for the Republic and against Franco's war on the civilian population.

In the North East, as in the rest of the country, joint work with the Catholic Church

did not last long. The refugee children were a propaganda setback for Franco's supporters and, through the Vatican Secretariat, pressure was exerted to repatriate them as soon as possible. In the North East, the children from the Catholic colonies had returned to Spain by May 1938 but most of those looked after by the local Basque Children's Committee remained. The North East committees were intent on ensuring that when children were repatriated, it would be to conditions of safety and at the genuine request of their families. Some harsh exchanges between Catholic spokesmen and Basque Children's Committee members took place in the local newspapers, and showed in fact that they represented the two sides in the civil war.

At the start of the Second World War most of the *niños* in the North East had been repatriated to Spain, but a few remained here permanently. They included a señorita at Percy Park, Carmen Gil, who married one of the Labour Party activists on the hostel committee. Carmen now lives with her family in Salford. Nell Badsey adopted one of the boys from Percy Park, Angel Perez Martínez, and as Angel Badsey, he worked until his retirement in the Sunderland shipyards. Just two examples, as Adrian Bell puts it, of those for whom "three months" meant their adult lives.

*I would be delighted to hear from former refugees who were looked after in any of these "colonies", or from their own children and families. You can reach me at [donwatson@btinternet.com] or through the Basque Children of '37 Association UK.*