

The working class in the Cuban Revolution

In most histories of the Cuban revolution the role of the working class and the trade unions gets little attention. This is a mistake, argues Steve Cushion, because they played an important role in the destruction of the Batista dictatorship between 1956 and 1959.

THE CUBAN revolution that put an end to the Batista regime is widely seen as emerging from a rural guerrilla struggle, but the Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio (M-26-7), which organised that campaign under the leadership of Fidel Castro, placed the general strike at the heart of its approach to overthrowing the Batista dictatorship.

The Cuban working class is commonly seen as being politically inactive throughout the period of the Cuban insurrection. However, while the workers in Havana were relatively quiescent, the further east one looks, the more evidence of working class political opposition can be found, particularly in Guantanamo.¹ Here, a group of railway workers, members of the M-26-7, organised a five-day railway strike to support the Granma landing in 1956, a province-wide general strike in protest at the murder of one of their leaders in 1957 as well as many shorter actions to defend the economic interests of the rail workers.

They recruited telephone operators to record police conversations, while train crews smuggled arms to the guerrillas in the hills. The largely ignored activities of these railway workers from Guantanamo provide us with an outstanding example of the connection between armed struggle and the mass working class action required for a successful general strike against a vicious dictatorship.

Batista and the employers' offensive

Cuba in the 1950s was ruled by a brutal regime, headed by Fulgencia Batista. It is common to view this regime as made up of a small group, Batista and his cronies, intent merely on enriching themselves through corruption, a clique which gained the support of the United States by accommodating to their anti-communist foreign policy agenda in the period of the Cold War.

While this is true, it only tells half the story. The Cuban economy in the 1950s was faced with a crisis of profitability and productivity and Cuban and US capital would only be able to retain their profit margins if they could reduce

Cuban workers' ability to resist attacks on their wages and employment levels. This meant taking on, and breaking, a well-organised trade union movement with a strong tradition of militant economic and political struggle.

The employers' obsession with productivity is described in the 1951 Report on Cuba compiled for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. This report identifies the resistance of workers to mechanisation and other productivity measures as the main problem facing the Cuban economy. Francis Truslow, principal author of the report, states:

"Employees strongly resist mechanisation and cost-cutting methods. 'Featherbedding' is encouraged and the discharge of employees for legitimate cause made difficult or impossible.² With labor still making wage demands, it is believed that in many cases they have reached the limit that employers will tolerate."³

The report argues that increased productivity would attract investment, promote diversification and thereby produce jobs. Underneath the pious rhetoric calling for greater co-operation between management and labour lies the concrete proposal to make dismissal of employees simpler, faster and cheaper.⁴ The chronically high level of unemployment deeply affected the consciousness of those in work and job security was always the prime concern of unionised workers.⁵

At the start of the 1950s, Cuba had the highest percentage of unionised workers in Latin America,⁶ but the main federation, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC), was completely bureaucratised and dependent upon its relationship with the government, with most disputes settled by the intervention of the Ministry of Labour rather than by direct action or collective bargaining. The CTC bureaucracy, headed by general secretary Eusebio Mujal, was utterly corrupt and, in 1948, had defeated the communists and gained control of the trade union machine through a mixture of gangster violence and government patronage.⁷

After the 1952 coup, Mujal became Batista's loyal collaborator⁸ and, in return for this collaboration, the government gave the mujalistas generous bribes and obliged employers to deduct trade union subscriptions from workers' wages by means of a compulsory check-off. Nevertheless, the mujalista bureaucracy was still under considerable pressure to deliver benefits to ordinary workers to prove that they were at least as effective as the communists they had replaced.

Given the strength of the trade unions, there had been little possibility that the Truslow report could be implemented by an elected government; rather it required an authoritarian regime to enforce its proposals which, at least in the short term, could only result in a considerable increase in the already chronic level of unemployment. The army coup that brought in the Batista dictatorship in 1952 was widely seen in this light at the time. To quote the British Embassy:

"... during the Prio regime when many observers considered that the workers were receiving better treatment than the economy of the country could in the long term afford."⁹

and:

"I am more and more convinced that the basic reason for the Armed Forces having staged the revolution was their utter disgust at the growing and unrestrained power of Labour".¹⁰

The majority of reformist politicians represented the capitalist interests that needed productivity increases and this interpretation of the nature of the Batista dictatorship is born out by their behaviour in scrambling for jobs in the new government.¹¹ Those who did not compromise with the dictatorship increasingly focused on

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constitutional rather than social questions and limited their activity to issuing manifestos in favour of reconciliation,¹² thereby losing influence with most workers whose main interest in the 1940 constitution was the labour protection articles.

The working class response

By the end of 1954, financial problems that resulted from the drop in sugar prices in 1953, pushed the US owned Ferrocarriles Consolidados, the railway company that operated the network in the eastern end of the island, to announce 1,550 redundancies and a 20% wage cut. This was an important turning point in the development of working class opposition to Batista as, despite rank and file workers resisting to the limit of their ability, they were finally defeated.

There were two militantly waged strikes, in December 1954 and February 1955, that forced the government to declare a truce. However, at the end of May, a report recommended an 8% wage cut, forced retirements, scrapping the collective agreement and the lengthening of working day along with extensive service cuts.¹³ Within 48 hours, starting in the city of Guantanamo, a strike paralysed the whole network, 10,000 workers in all. This time the full force of the state was moved against the workers, while the CTC leadership condemned the strikes out of hand.

The strikers replied by completely shutting down the towns of Camaguey, Guantanamo, Morón, Nuevitas, and Santiago. Given that the army was rounding up train-operating and signalling staff and forcing them to work at gunpoint, it was difficult for them to publicly demonstrate and picket. In a pattern that was repeated in other industrial disputes of the time, this public role was taken over by women, either railway office workers or the families of the strikers, who also played a leading role in setting up neighbourhood solidarity committees.

Batista refused to publicly meet union representatives, while the police, army and secret policemen started rooting workers out of their houses and forcing retired workers

back to work. The CTC bureaucracy reached an agreement with the government without consulting the strikers, despite the continuing strength of the strike and growing solidarity from other workers. In return for a few minor concessions, they accepted the 8% cut, 600 redundancies and signed a no-strike agreement thereby placing the strikers outside the law.¹⁴

The government increased their physical attacks on the workers and, amid the demoralisation caused by the

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sell-out, the strike was defeated. In the days that followed, many of the leading militants were dismissed.¹⁵

The defeat of a well-organised strike by an economically powerful group of workers with considerable experience in industrial activity made a group of militants in Guantanamo realise that, unless the Batista regime could be militarily defeated, they would no longer be able to defend and advance their conditions and wages. Neither would they be able to regain control of their own trade union while Mujal and his cronies had the support of the state.

From the start of the dictatorship in 1952, Guantanamo had been a centre of intense opposition to the Batista dictatorship but the limitations of peaceful methods were becoming obvious when faced with such a level of repression. So, shortly after the strike, Frank País, regional co-ordinator of the M-26-J visited Guantanamo and was introduced by a local student, Enrique Soto, to Octavio Louit, a railwayman who, in September 1955, agreed to form the local branch of the revolutionary organisation, an endeavour in which he was helped by another railway worker, Antonio "Nico" Torres.¹⁶

Trotskyists, Stalinists and the national democratic revolution

Torres was an experienced working class militant who had been an active member of the Trotskyist Partido Obrero Revolucionario (POR) from 1934 until it finally disappeared in the late 1940s and had been instrumental in building the POR's most important working class base in Guantanamo.¹⁷ Long before its final demise, the POR had departed from any attempt to implement an independent working class programme and had adopted a policy of supporting and entering militant petit bourgeois nationalist groupings. The decision of the Guantanamo ex-Trotskyists to join the M-26-7 therefore was a logical progression and occurred just in time for them to intervene in a major sugar-workers' strike.

The Cuban economy was totally subordinated to the interests of the sugar industry which had been dominated

by large US corporations since Spanish colonial days.¹⁸ While, by the 1950s there had been an increase in Cuban ownership, there had been a parallel process of integration of the Cuban bourgeoisie into US capitalism.¹⁹

The ruling class in these circumstances was very small. However, despite the extreme division of wealth, a middle class did exist and they felt resentful at being excluded from power. Many of them, particularly the students, felt that their prospects would be improved by an economy run in the interests of local industry. This nationalist middle class required a mass base to advance such policies and, given Cuba's gross economic inequality, that programme had to address the country's social problems if it was to attract support from the impoverished peasants and workers. This gave Cuban nationalism its particular nature as a mass popular movement arguing for economic nationalist policies to develop local industry, arguing that this would increase prosperity and employment prospects.

This argument attracted considerable working class support, with the close relationship between the Cuban bourgeoisie and US imperialism leading many workers to see the national question in class terms. However, this did not lead to the posing of socialism as an alternative, merely to seeing the ruling class as "traitors". Indeed there was no organisation in Cuba in the 1950s advocating a socialist perspective for the revolution; the nearest was the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP), as the communist party was known, which restricted itself to uncritical and unbelievable accounts of life in the Soviet Union under Stalin – an approach calculated to get the very notion of socialism a bad name.

The PSP supported a stage-ist approach to politics which required the establishment of a "bourgeois-democratic" regime before a start could be made along the road to socialism.²⁰ During the early 1930s the Cuban communists increased their influence and membership by its support for workers in the sugar industry from 1930 to 1933 and thereafter played an important role in the Cuban trade union movement.²¹ It was, however, taken by surprise when, in 1933, a Havana bus drivers' strike turned into a revolutionary general strike. The PSP tried to settle the strike in return for concessions from the government but when the strike continued nevertheless and successfully brought the government down, the communists lost much of their credibility.

The Comintern's policy of calling for popular fronts – alliances between the working class and "progressive elements" in the bourgeoisie – caused Communist Parties internationally to pursue "national unity" against fascism and imperialism, while minimising the significance of the class struggle.²² In common with the other Communist Parties of Latin America, the PSP did not support armed action, calling instead for the setting up of a Frente Democrático Nacional to unite the whole opposition in a popular front to resist Batista using legal means.²³

Unfortunately for them, most of the rest of the opposition was as anti-communist as it was anti-Batista and the call fell on deaf ears. Having been falsely accused of complicity in Fidel Castro's 1953 attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba, the PSP was also a victim of the gener-

ally increased repression, despite condemning Castro as an adventurist. Their newspaper was closed down and the remaining Communists were purged from the CTC.²⁴

With their wholehearted adoption of the rhetoric of national unity, the Cuban Communist Party's "bread and butter" approach to trade unionism did not offer a socialist alternative to challenge the hegemonic nationalist politics. As a result they remained content with tailing other, more militant nationalist currents.²⁵

One such grouping was the M-26-7 whose 1956 programme spoke of democracy, social justice and economic independence.²⁶ Thus, while there were considerable differences in the tactics by which the PSP and the M-26-7 proposed to implement their programmes, there was no great difference in the basic politics behind these programmes, with a shared concern for economic justice, national independence and an end to corruption.

Both groupings also sought to unite the Cuban "people", a nebulous term that included workers, peasants, the unemployed, small businessmen and professionals along with patriotic industrialists. However, because the M-26-7's tactics for the revolutionary overthrow of Batista centred on a general strike, they differed markedly from the PSP in stressing the need to combine that strike with an armed insurrection.²⁷

Sugar workers

In the wake of the defeat of the railway workers, it was this combination of strike and armed action that attracted the militants in Guantanamo. Their own experience was confirmed later in 1955 as the regime managed to defeat other workers' resistance to the employers' productivity drive in the banking and telecommunication sectors, as well as by various groups of factory workers and finally by breaking a bitterly fought sugar workers' strike.

Cuban sugar workers had a militant history and, in addition to forming the most important Cuban trade union, they had set up soviets and armed militias during their 1933 strike.²⁸ The seasonal nature of their employment militated against stable trade union organisation, with membership numbers fluctuating widely according to the time of year, but this saved them from the dangers of conservatism that are inherent in traditional skilled trade unionism.

Thus, for example, sugar workers had a tradition of cane burning as a tactic for enforcing their demands. However, the fragmenting effects of the seasonal harvest cycle were offset by the fact that most of them lived in communities in which they formed the overwhelming majority, thereby reinforcing workplace solidarity with community backing at times of industrial struggle. In many ways, despite the apparent dissimilarity, the sugar workers tradition of struggle and their vital place in the national economy gave them a similar leading position in the life of the Cuban labour movement that mineworkers occupied in Europe.²⁹

When they went on strike at the end of 1955 and found themselves faced with a level of repression only previously used to attack militant students, the sugar workers defended themselves and set up road blocks, burnt cane

fields and occupied town halls and city centres; actions that resulted in hundreds arrested or wounded, with several strikers being killed.³⁰ This confrontation destroyed many illusions and convinced a significant minority of workers that there was no longer any reformist solution to their problems.³¹

Revolutionary resistance in the unions

The defeat of the class struggles of 1955 confirmed the decision of the Guantanamo railway workers. The first step in their reorganisation was to build a clandestine workplace-based cell structure, each cell composed of a member responsible for co-ordination, one for sabotage, one for fund raising, one for propaganda and one for mass action such as strikes and demonstrations. Each cell member, apart from the co-ordinator, recruited up to 10 others to help with the work. The combination of mass action with sabotage was crucial to their concept of "Sindicalismo beligerente", an approach that led telephone workers to cut phone lines, sugar workers to burn fields and railway workers to derail scab trains during strikes.

In a manner common to effective rank and file organisation everywhere, it was necessary to undermine the influence of the trade union bureaucracy and to this end, the M-26-7 cells started to organise short strikes and go-slows over any issue that came to hand, often stoppages of only 5 or 10 minutes, which nevertheless proved extremely disruptive to the railway timetable while minimising the possibility for victimisation. As a result of this muscle-flexing during 1956, they were able to extend their organisation to other industries in the Guantanamo region, most noticeably to the workers in the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, so that by the end of the year they were in a position to graduate to more ambitious activities.

During 1955, Fidel Castro had been released from prison and had gone to Mexico to train a rebel force with the inten-

TIMELINE

March 1952 Fulgencia Batista launches military coup which overthrows the Auténtico President Carlos Prío Socarrás. Military government is established and 1940 constitution suspended.

July 26 1953 Fidel Castro, a member of the youth wing of the nationalists Ortodoxo Party, leads attack on Moncada barracks to seize arms. Attack fails, many executed, Castro imprisoned.

May 1955 Castro and other political prisoners freed under amnesty from Batista. Castro moves to Mexico where he founds July 26th Movement (M-26-7) still within Ortodoxo Party. Joined by Ernesto Che Guevara.

1957 Growing struggles against Batista. Sabotage by M-26-7 in cities led by Frank Pais and Faustino Perez. Pais assassinated 30 July 1957.

April 1958 revolutionary general strike called by National Directorate fails, communists (PPS) excluded from organisation of strike.

End 1958 Growing disintegration of Batista forces. Guevara advances on Havana.

1 January 1959 Week long general strike in Havana, Batista flees, guerrillas take capital on 5 January.

February-May 1959 Coalition government formed with leading bourgeois figures.

tion of returning to Cuba and begin a guerrilla uprising. The intention was to land on the south coast from a small boat, the now famous Granma, at the end of November 1956. Frank País was charged with creating a diversion by means of an armed assault on various police and army establishments in Santiago. He in turn instructed the M-26-7 group in Guantanamo to prevent military reinforcements reaching Santiago from the Guantanamo region.

In Guantánamo itself the strike was total on the railway, the electrical plant, the aerodrome, the banks and buses, with most shops and businesses shut

This they achieved by a spectacular railway strike during which the whole network at the eastern end of the island was paralysed for five days, all the more impressive because the workers raised no demands other than to make it clear that they were acting in support of their comrades in Santiago. The rest of the town managed to maintain a general strike for a couple of days, while the workers in the processing plant of the Ermita sugar plantation, where the M-26-7 had two active cells, successfully attacked the police barracks on the plantation.

As a result of the success of the strike in Guantánamo, Torres, now a wanted man, was made chair of a commission charged with rolling out the workplace cell structure nationwide and spent the next year criss-crossing the island with this objective. Meanwhile in Guantánamo, the leadership of the M-26-7 was taken over by another ex-Trotskyist, Gustavo Fraga, who worked on the US naval base.

There was a considerable M-26-7 grouping amongst the US base workers, but their role was less one of direct militant action, and more of supplying the rebels in the mountains. Raising funds, as well as pilfering clothing, food and petrol were their initial activities, but, discovering that some of the ordinary US sailors were sympathetic to the rebels, they quickly found sources of arms and ammunition, which the train drivers were able to help smuggle out.

Fraga himself, not only co-ordinated militant action in the Guantánamo area, he also ran the M-26-7 explosives factory in a garage in the city. He was killed there in an accidental explosion while preparing home-made bombs to support a general strike in August 1957 following the murder of Frank País in Santiago.

Frank País, now the M-26-7 national co-ordinator of action, was based in Santiago from where he was working both to promote the movement's clandestine operations and to organise support for the guerrillas in the nearby Sierra Maestra mountains. His murder at the end of July 1957 by a local police chief produced a general strike in the province of Oriente, of which Santiago was the capital; a strike which was probably the biggest public demonstration of opposition during the entire Batista dictatorship.³²

Wherever the August 1957 strike is mentioned in the literature, it is characterised as "spontaneous" and this spontaneity is confused with lack of organisation and political direction. However, this betrays a lack of understanding of how much more real organisation is required to produce a "spontaneous" strike than one formally called by the bureaucracy; an interpretation confirmed by interviews with militants involved in the strike.

Miguel Angel Yero, an activist in the M-26-7 Sección Obrera, describes how he and his comrades went to Frank País's funeral with the idea of initiating some action, if at all possible. On seeing a large turnout of Santiagueros very many of whom shared their anger, they started to shout for a strike. The call was taken up and the 60,000 people at the funeral marched through the town, calling workers out of their factories, offices and shops until the town was paralysed in a strike that lasted five days.³³

An established unofficial network of M-26-7, Communist Party and independent militants operated in Oriente which was able to spread the strike to the rest of the province, including a shutdown of the railway network.³⁴ However, Octavio Louit, who left Santiago to co-ordinate action in the centre of the island, maintains that, while there was support amongst the workers of Camagüey and Las Villas for the strike, state repression prevented its extension to other regions.³⁵ Efforts to launch a strike in Havana on 5 August were unsuccessful outside of a few traditionally militant sectors such as public transport, due in part to some swift action by the mujalista bureaucracy.³⁶

In Guantánamo itself, where Frank País was well known and respected, the strike was total on the railway, the electrical plant, the aerodrome, the banks and buses, with most shops and businesses shut; all of this was accompanied by bombings of bridges and power lines and armed skirmishes with the police and rural guard. The brutal behaviour of the forces of repression helped spread the strike as the army broke open shops that were shut and threw their merchandise into the street, giving a propaganda coup to the rebels who ensured that the soldiers were the only ones engaged in looting.

The explosion in the M-26-7 bomb factory was a blow to the movement, as they not only lost some important militants but also a considerable stock of weapons. Yet it served to prolong the strike and deepen bitterness against the regime since the first act of the police on arrival at the scene was to shoot dead two neighbours who were trying to help put out the fire. But with Guantánamo the only city remaining on strike by 9 August, the national leadership of the M-26-7 ordered a return to work, fearing the army was planning to make an example of the town.

The 1958 general strike

Impressed with the impact of the August strike, Fidel Castro called what he hoped would be a triumphant general strike on 9 April 1958. This strike, which received almost no working class support, was a complete disaster and cost the lives of many of the movement's best underground activists. Batista's chief of police issued an instruction: "No wounded, No prisoners".³⁷

The failure of the 1958 general strike largely resulted

from the M-26-7's essentially military view of the general strike.³⁸ The rebel leadership decided to keep the date of the proposed action secret, only telling militants in Havana on the morning of 9 April itself. If the date was secret, the fact that a strike was planned was not, Fidel Castro having announced their intentions when he made his declaration of "Total War" on 12 March. Thus forewarned, the government had suspended the constitution and placed the army and police on a war footing, while the CTC bureaucracy had stepped up its anti-Castro propaganda, issuing threats that any worker supporting the strike would be dismissed and that the union would not support them. To this end, the CTC drew up lists of suspected militants for the police and the employers.³⁹

Most workers on the other hand were taken completely by surprise when the call came at 11am on 9 April and were thereby denied that feeling of ownership of and involvement in a strike that is so essential to success. The police and army, supported by a pro-government militia, the Tigers, roared through the streets discharging their weapons. The poorly armed M-26-7 militia were unable to wrest control; indeed, most were not even in a position to defend themselves. In these circumstances, most workers found it impossible to leave work and the strike failed, leaving the government free to introduce a reign of terror.

The workers reorganise

The process of picking up the pieces began with a meeting on 3 May at Los Altos de Mompié in the Sierra Maestra. From the point of view of working class involvement in the insurrection, two important decisions were taken; one was to give the guerrilla struggle priority; the other was to appoint Níco Torres to overall leadership of the workers' section of the movement, now renamed the Frente Obrero Nacional (FON).⁴⁰

The new FON leadership's change of style was immediately apparent with the issue of a manifesto in May 1958 that took responsibility for the fiasco, while still maintaining that a general strike was the most efficient way to defend and extend workers' rights as well as "curbing the sinister despotism that is strangling our republic".⁴¹ The manifesto finished with a list of demands that mixed the economic and political in a way that is clearly designed to link the need for revolutionary change with workers' immediate concerns.

The other decision taken by the M-26-7 at Altos de Mompié, to give priority to the guerrilla struggle, while at first sight looking like a turn away from the tactic of a general strike, in fact produced the conditions that would make such a strike successful.

Faustino Pérez recalls in a later interview that one of the reasons for the failure of the 9 April strike was that workers would not strike without adequate armed support.⁴² The turn to a more militaristic approach by the M-26-7 was not taken with a view to rectifying this inadequacy, but it did have that effect in the longer term. Going on strike in Batista's Cuba could be a life or death decision and workers had to feel some confidence in their chances of survival and in the possibilities of successfully gaining a result.

In the summer of 1958, however, the guerrillas still had to beat the encircling forces of Batista's army which outnumbered them enormously. The army and police, while they had demonstrated ruthless efficiency when shooting down poorly armed students or unarmed striking workers, were not nearly so determined when faced with well-trained and politically motivated guerrillas who rapidly gained the military upper hand in the second half of 1958. There was a parallel growth in financial support coming from workers through late summer and autumn, as well as the increase in membership of the FON, which has been estimated at 15,000 by the end of the year.⁴³

The Communist Party did not finally commit itself to supporting the armed struggle until November 1958 and then the FON was formally merged with the PSP front organisation Comité Nacional de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras (CNDDO)⁴⁴ to form the Frente Obrero Nacional Unido (FONU).⁴⁵ This new organisation adopted a 12-point programme that called for a 20% wage increase, for opposition to mechanisation along with other measures against unemployment, for an end to racial discrimination, for social protection for women, children and the unemployed, for the reinstatement of victimised workers, for trade union democracy, the end to the compulsory check-off, and for the reinstatement of the 1940 constitution.⁴⁶

This last demand meant much more to workers than a desire for political democracy, about which they proved largely indifferent, for the 1940 constitution contained important employment rights that they had lost under the Batista regime.⁴⁷ While these demands reflect the immediate interests of the working class and would cost the employers a considerable sum to implement, there was nothing here that in any way challenged the capitalist basis of the economy.

On 8 December, in the Sierra Cristal mountains above Guantánamo, Torres convened, in the name of the FONU, a congress of workers' delegates that endorsed the 12-point programme as well as formally repudiating the mujalista control of the CTC. This was subsequently endorsed at the

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First National Conference of Sugar Workers in Liberated Territory held on 20-21 December in the area controlled by Camilo Cienfuegos.⁴⁸

During this period there was little or no industrial action, as most workers saw little point in risking their lives and livelihoods in advance of the increasingly likely military victory of the rebel army. The more militant could always satisfy their impatience with sabotage or going to the mountains to join the rebel army. The flight of Batista on New Year's Day 1959, however, would give rise to the need for more active mass participation.

The 1959 Havana general strike

Those members of Batista's general staff who had been left behind were plotting with the US ambassador in a last minute attempt to prevent the rebel victory and, despite swift re-deployment of the columns commanded by Guevara and Cienfuegos to Havana, there was a danger that an army coup could have split some of the middle class support away from the M-26-7 and prolonged the civil war.⁴⁹

The strike provided such powerful evidence of the overwhelming popularity of the rebel cause that the army chiefs quickly abandoned their plans for a military coup and most fled to avoid popular vengeance, a path followed by many CTC bureaucrats.

The importance of the support given to Batista by the CTC bureaucracy should not be underestimated as control of the formal trade union structures had given the regime a certain legitimacy in its early days. However, Mujal's abuse of that control finally made him the second most hated man in Cuba after the dictator himself. The class struggles of 1955 exposed the inadequacies of the mujalista leadership of the trade unions and won support for the rebels, but that support could not be taken for granted and the workers would not support a strike in 1958 that they could see was suicidal.

ENDNOTES

1. This downplaying of the role of the working class in the Cuban revolution comes not just from right-wing historians who seek to portray the Cuban revolution as a type of putsch carried out by a small band of guerrillas, but from some on the left as well. The SWP/IST tendency also downplays the role of the working class in Cuba because it would not fit in with their schema of deflected permanent revolution. Mike Gonzales, for example, argues that, The nature of the guerrilla struggle and its leadership by the 26 July Movement under Castro meant that no mass organisations or organs of workers defence had grown in the course of the revolutionary war. Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution (2004) p.101. This is patently not the case, as this article shows.
2. Truslow, Report on Cuba (also known as the Truslow Report) (1951) p.10
3. Ibid p.136
4. Ibid p.388
5. Pérez, Cuba (2006) pp.224-230
6. Sims, Cuba (1992) p.217
7. Stubbs, Tabaco en la periferia (1989) pp.161-164
8. Spalding, Organized Labor in Latin America (1977) pp.227-238
9. Spalding, Organized Labor in Latin America (1977) pp.227-238
10. FO 371/103390 - AK2181/1 (1953) Trade unionism in Cuba
10. FO 371/97516/7 - AK1015/33 (1952) Mujal's relationship with Batista
11. Osa, En Cuba III, 1952-4 (2008)
12. 4 Ibarra, Fracaso de los Moderados (1994) p.2
13. Carta Semanal (15th June 1955), Diario de la Marina (8th June 1955)
14. Bohemia (28th August 1955), Diario de la Marina (7th July 1955)
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16. Coma, El Movimiento 26 de Julio en Guantánamo (1981) pp.15-19
17. Figueras, Semblanza de Antonio Torres Chedebaux (n/d). See also Gary Tennant, Trotskyism in Cuba between the Revolutions

Nevertheless, when confronted with a favourable military balance of forces, the organised working class were more than ready to give active support to the revolutionary process and, in so doing, ensured the final victory of the M-26-7. The general strike of January 1959 must be seen as one of the final decisive moments in the overthrow of the dictatorship.

Steve Cushion, based at London University's Institute for the Study of the Americas, is currently undertaking research examining the relationship between working class mass action and the armed struggle during the insurrectionary phase of the Cuban Revolution.

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18. Pérez-Stable, Cuban Revolution (1999) pp.8
19. Blackburn, Prologue to Revolution (1963) p.60-61
20. Aguilar, Marxism in Latin America (1968) p.28
21. Carr, Mill Occupations and Soviets (1996) p.130
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23. Karol, Guerrillas in power (1970) p.129
24. PCC, Historia del movimiento obrero cubano (1985) pp.274-6
25. Aguilar, Marxism in Latin America (1968) p.28
26. Bonachea & Valdés, Cuba in revolution (1972) pp.113-40
27. García-Pérez, Insurrection and Revolution (1998) p.72
28. Carr, Mill Occupations and Soviets (1996) p.141
29. Zanetti & García, Sugar and Railroads (1998) 30. García-Olivares, José Antonio Echeverría (1979) p.258
31. Pérez-Stable, Cuban Revolution (1999) p.55
32. Bonachea & San Martín, Cuban insurrection. (1974) p.146
33. Torres-Hernandez, Huelga de Agosto (1977) p.5
34. Zanetti & García, Sugar and Railroads (1998) p.394
35. Torres-Hernandez, Huelga de Agosto (1977) p.6
36. PCC, Historia del movimiento obrero cubano (1985) pp.333-4
37. Cabrera, Sagua la Grande escribió su nombre en la historia, (1959) pp.36-39&122-3. It is worth noting that the strike was successful in Guantánamo where the recently established guerrilla second front in the nearby Sierra Cristal mountains, led by Raul Castro, was able to engage the local army units and protect the strikers.
38. Sweig, Inside the Cuban Revolution (2002) pp.44-5
39. Bohemia (19th April 1959) p.58-61&111-2
40. Tennant, Dissident Cuban Communism (1999) p.302-319
41. Manifiesto del FON (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:14/1.1/6
42. Bohemia (19th April 1959) pp.111-2
43. Alexander, History of Organized Labor in Cuba (2002) p.159
44. PCC, Historia del movimiento obrero cubano (1985) p.286
45. PCC, Historia del movimiento obrero cubano (1985) pp.352-360
46. Alexander, History of Organized Labor in Cuba (2002) p.161
47. Blackburn, Prologue to Revolution (1963) p.70
48. Bonachea & San Martín, Cuban Insurrection, (1974) p.278