

**Cuba:
How the Workers
& Peasants Made
the Revolution**

Chris Slee

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By Chris Slee

Some left groups claim that the Cuban revolution was made by a few hundred guerrilla fighters, and that the working class played no role.

For example Ruth Braham, writing in *Socialist Alternative* magazine, claims that the Cuban Revolution “entailed a mere 800 armed guerrillas seizing power, again on behalf of the majority but without their active involvement”.¹

Similar views have been expressed by members of the International Socialist Organisation. For example, Jonathan Sherlock says: “If you believe that Cuba is somehow socialist, however distorted, then you believe that it is possible to bring about socialism via several hundred guerrilla fighters coming down from the mountains at the right moment and seizing power. You will believe ... that socialism can be brought about without working-class struggle”.²

In reality, “working-class struggle” played an essential central role in the Cuban revolution. The workers, peasants and students played an active role, before, during and after the insurrection which destroyed the Batista dictatorship in January 1959. The overthrow of the regime was not simply a matter of guerrilla fighters marching into the cities. Fidel Castro called a general strike which developed into a mass popular uprising during the first few days of January 1959. The subsequent transformation of property relations was the result of ongoing mass struggles by the workers and peasants.

But before discussing this in detail I will give some historical background to the Cuban revolution.

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Spanish colonialism

Cuba was “discovered” by Columbus in 1492, and claimed as a Spanish colony. The indigenous population was treated with great brutality, including horrific massacres. They were dispossessed of their land. Many died of hunger and disease. The majority of the indigenous population of Cuba was wiped out.

Havana became a major port and military centre for the Spanish empire. Ships taking the plundered treasures of central and south America back to Spain gathered in Havana before crossing the Atlantic.

Sugar plantations were developed using slave labour. The slaves, who were brought in from Africa, were treated with great brutality. Many died from exhaustion, from industrial accidents in the sugar mills, or from disease, or were killed by their owners, often as punishment for trivial offences. A continual inflow of new slaves from Africa was required to replace those who died. Historian Hugh Thomas speaks of “the need for replacement of 8% to 10% each year”.³

During the 1840s there was a series of slave revolts in various plantations and other worksites across Cuba. The revolts were crushed, but caused some plantation owners to consider replacing slavery by wage labour.

There was widespread discontent with Spanish rule, even amongst the upper classes of Cuban society. In 1868 a war of independence broke out. One of the leaders was Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a plantation owner who freed his slaves and enrolled them in his small army. Some rebel commanders, such as Antonio Maceo, raided plantations and freed the slaves.

But the rebel movement was not united on the policy of freeing slaves. The more conservative sections of the movement were reluctant to authorise Maceo to take the war into the western half of Cuba, where most of the sugar plantations were situated, and the movement remained on the defensive in the east for most of the ten years of the war. In 1878 an armistice was signed between the Spanish colonial government and most of the rebel leaders. Maceo refused to accept it, but his forces were defeated, and he went into exile.

In November 1879 the Spanish prime minister announced that slavery would be abolished in Cuba as from 1888. Many slave owners, believing that “free” labour would be cheaper than maintaining slaves, freed them before the deadline. Once the slaves were free, plantation owners were no longer obliged to feed them all year round. Instead they could hire workers for a few months in the busy season, leaving them to fend for themselves at other times.

A new war of independence broke out in 1895, inspired by José Martí. Jailed as a teenager and then exiled from Cuba by the Spanish colonial authorities, Martí built a

movement for independence and democracy amongst Cubans living overseas, particularly Cuban workers living in the United States. While campaigning for independence from Spain, he foresaw the danger of the emerging US imperialism, which aimed to dominate Latin America. He saw the need for Latin American unity to counter this.

Martí succeeded in re-uniting many veterans of the first Cuban war of independence, including Maceo, and returned to Cuba in 1895 to renew the struggle. Neither the rebels nor the Spanish forces were able to win a decisive victory. Martí and Maceo were both killed in the fighting.

In 1898 the United States stepped in, supposedly to support the Cuban independence fighters. But after defeating the Spanish forces, the US ordered the independence fighters to disarm. A military government was established in January 1899, headed by a US general.

US neocolonialism

Cuba was ruled by the US military government until 1902, when formal independence was granted. However the US retained the ability to intervene in Cuba, not only economically and politically but also militarily.

A constitutional convention was elected in 1900. However the convention delegates were pressured to accept severe limitations on Cuba's sovereignty. In 1901 the US congress passed the Platt amendment, which proclaimed the intention of the US to intervene in Cuban affairs whenever it saw fit, and to maintain bases in Cuba. The constitutional convention was pressured to accept these US dictates, and to include them as an appendix to the new Cuban constitution.

The delegates were told that the US army would not be withdrawn from Cuba unless they agreed to accept the Platt amendment. They were also promised that if they did agree, Cuban sugar would gain preferential access to the US market.

The US formally handed over power to the new Cuban government in May 1902. Guantánamo Bay and Bahía Honda were leased to the US as military bases. (Bahía Honda was given up in 1912, in return for an expansion in the size of the Guantánamo lease.)

In 1906 there was a revolt against the government of president Tomás Estrada Palma, who had been "re-elected" without opposition in fraudulent elections in December 1905. Estrada called for US military aid to suppress the revolt. Two thousand US marines landed near Havana in September 1906. The US set up a new "provisional government" headed by a US judge, Charles Magoon.

In 1909 the US once again handed over government to an elected Cuban president.

However, the US retained the ability to impose its will on Cuba through economic and diplomatic pressure and the threat of renewed military intervention. The US literally used “gunboat diplomacy” whenever this was felt to be necessary. On January 6, 1921, following protests against fraudulent elections conducted by president Menocal, the US sent General Enoch Crowder to Havana in the battleship *Minnesota*. According to historian Hugh Thomas, “He [Crowder] kept his headquarters on the *Minnesota*, issuing recommendations to Menocal which were in effect orders”.⁴

Thus while Cuba was formally independent and democratic (except that women could not vote), independence and democracy were to a large extent fictitious, since the US could veto or overturn any decision by the Cuban government.

This situation was conducive to a high level of corruption in the political system. Politicians took bribes in return for government contracts, for pardons, etc.

There were periodic outbreaks of protest and rebellion. Most of these rebellions were crushed. But protests by university students in 1922-23 won a victory. Under the leadership of Julio Antonio Mella, secretary of the newly formed University Students Federation (FEU), the students campaigned against corruption in the university. They were successful: a hundred corrupt “professors” who had been given fictitious jobs at the university because they were cronies of the president were sacked. Furthermore, a system of election of the rector by students, staff and ex-students was introduced.

In 1924 Gerardo Machado was elected president. His regime was extremely corrupt and highly repressive. Trade unionists and student activists were murdered. Mella, who had led the student protests in 1922-23, and who had become a founder of the Cuban Communist Party in 1925, was murdered in Mexico in 1929 by an agent of Machado. Political parties were suppressed, and Machado, a former army officer, used the army as his main instrument of rule.

1933 revolution

Many middle class people hoped for US intervention to remove Machado. A group called ABC, comprised mainly of students, carried out bomb attacks with the aim of showing that Machado could not ensure stability, thereby provoking US intervention to remove him.

Meanwhile the Communist Party was gaining strength, despite the repression. In 1930, 200,000 workers participated in a political strike against Machado. A communist-led sugar workers strike closed down many sugar mills in Cuba in early 1933.

In early August 1933 there were strikes throughout Havana, culminating in a general strike on August 12 and the flight of Machado from the country. The US ambassador Sumner Welles tried to organise a new pro-US government to replace

him. Welles succeeded in having Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a conservative diplomat (and the grandson of the independence leader of the same name), declared president; but a few weeks later a coup was carried out by a group of sergeants in the Cuban army, in alliance with students from the University of Havana. Fulgencio Batista emerged as leader of the sergeants. He formed a provisional government headed by a university professor, Ramón Grau San Martín. Batista proclaimed himself a colonel and made himself head of the army.

The Grau San Martín government, which included prominent former student leader Antonio Guiteras, introduced significant reforms such as the eight-hour work day, a minimum wage for workers, land reform, university autonomy and the repudiation of Cuba's foreign debt.

But the army under Batista remained a repressive force. On September 29, for example, it attacked a memorial rally for Julio Antonio Mella and sacked the headquarters of the National Labour Confederation.

The US withheld recognition from the Grau government, and encouraged Batista to carry out a coup, which he did in January 1934. For the next six years Batista, as army commander, was the effective ruler of the country, although there was a series of other people holding the title of president.

While Batista's January 1934 coup marked a turn to the right, it did not mean the immediate and total reversal of all the gains of the revolution. Batista still claimed to be a revolutionary. While he was willing to repress militant workers, he also wanted to win popular support, which required him to support some progressive reforms. In some ways, Batista in his early years was comparable to third world bourgeois nationalist leaders of military origin, such as Peron and Nasser.

In April 1937 the CP characterised Batista as a fascist, and tried (without success) to form a popular front with bourgeois anti-Batista groups. But by 1938 the CP had changed its policy and made a deal with Batista. The Communist Party was legalised and allowed to reorganise the union movement under its control, resulting in the creation of the CTC (Cuban Confederation of Workers). In return the CP supported Batista, resolving to "adopt a more positive attitude towards Colonel Batista, compelling him as a result to take up even more positively democratic attitudes".⁵ In 1940 the CP supported Batista in the presidential elections.

The CP's deal with Batista was denounced by radical bourgeois democrats such as Eduardo Chibás. It contributed to the hostility towards the CP that continued to exist for many years amongst a lot of radical activists, including many members of the July 26 Movement in the 1950s.

In 1939 a constituent assembly was elected. The union movement held

demonstrations to demand the inclusion of workers rights in the new constitution. The constitution adopted in 1940 included provisions for a 44-hour week and a month's paid holiday for workers, and restrictions on the ability of employers to sack workers, amongst other progressive measures. These provisions were, however, implemented very unevenly in practice.

Batista was elected president in 1940, with support from the CP, but also from many wealthy people who feared (wrongly) that his opponent Grau would carry out a social revolution.

Two CP members became ministers in Batista's government. In 1944 the CP changed its name to the Popular Socialist Party. With its expectation of "lasting peace for many generations" after the second world war,⁶ the PSP appeared to have abandoned the Marxist understanding of imperialism and class struggle.

The 1944 presidential election was won by Grau. Batista, who did not contest this election, left office a very wealthy man as a result of corruption, and went to live in Miami. But Grau's government, which included many former radicals of the 1930s, turned out to be even more corrupt than Batista's.

The issue of corruption led to a split in Grau's Cuban Revolutionary Party (also known as the *Autenticos*), with Eduardo Chibás setting up a new party, the Cuban Peoples Party (commonly known as the *Ortodoxos*) in 1947 on an anti-corruption platform.

With the onset of the Cold War, the Grau government launched an offensive against communists in the unions. Communist union leaders were murdered by pro-government thugs. From 1947 to 1951 the CTC was split, with two labour federations both claiming the name CTC. On July 29, 1947 the Minister of Labour Carlos Prio took over the CTC headquarters by force and handed it over to Autentico union officials.

Eventually the PSP-led federation gave up its attempt to maintain a separate structure. Some of its unions applied to join the Autentico-led federation, while other unions were dissolved and encouraged their members to join unions affiliated to the rival federation.

The PSP had been considerably weakened, but nevertheless retained a following in some sections of the working class. According to one estimate, "25% of Cuba's organised workers remained pro-communist, and of 120 sugar mill locals, the communists retained control of 40".⁷

In 1948 Prio won the presidential election. Batista returned from Miami and won election as a senator.

The Prio regime was highly corrupt. Eduardo Chibás regularly denounced corruption on his weekly radio program, and the *Ortodoxos* won growing support,

especially amongst poor people and amongst the youth. But in 1951, Chibás committed suicide, depriving the Ortodoxos of their most popular leader.

The May 1952 elections were expected to be a three way contest between the Autenticos (whose presidential candidate was Carlos Hevia), the Ortodoxos (whose candidate was Roberto Agramonte, following the suicide of Eduardo Chibás), and Batista. But on the night of March 9-10, Batista carried out a coup.

1952 coup

Although Batista was no longer army commander, he still had the support of many (though not all) army officers. Batista and his supporters quickly took over Havana's main army base and sent tanks to surround the presidential palace. Prio fled to the Mexican embassy.

The CTC called a general strike in protest at the coup. However Batista promised the CTC leadership that he would respect the existing labour laws, and the strike was soon called off. CTC leader Eusebio Mujal (who had collaborated with the Autentico government in ousting the PSP from the leadership of the CTC) became one of Batista's closest collaborators, and helped suppress opposition to the dictatorship within the unions.

The struggle against Batista

Batista's coup initially met little resistance. On March 10, 1952 there was a protest rally at Havana University, involving a few hundred students and workers.

Opposition to the dictatorship grew. Students were amongst the first to take action, holding numerous rallies and demonstrations throughout the years of Batista's dictatorship. On January 15, 1953 a student, Ruben Batista, was fatally wounded by police at a demonstration. He died on February 13. His funeral the following day became a large, militant demonstration of repudiation of the regime.

Groups of activists began to make plans for the overthrow of Batista. Fidel Castro was the leader of one such group, sometimes referred to as the Youth of the Centenary (a reference to the centenary of José Martí's birth). This was the group that carried out the attack on the Moncada barracks on July 26, 1953. The aim was to spark a nationwide insurrection which would overthrow Batista's regime. However it was quickly crushed. Many of the participants were murdered by the army and police, while others including Castro were captured and jailed. Castro and others who participated in the Moncada attack later went on to form the July 26 Movement.

Another militant group formed in the aftermath of Batista's coup was the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), led by Rafael García Bárceña, a university professor

who had been a radical activist in the 1920s and 1930s. This group planned to lead a student march on an army camp in April 1953, with the aim of persuading the soldiers to rise against Batista. However the plan was foiled by mass arrests. García Bárcena was amongst those arrested. Some supporters of the MNR who escaped arrest continued trying to build it as a revolutionary organisation. Many of them later joined the July 26 Movement.

Another group, formed in 1955, was the Revolutionary Directorate, led by José Antonio Echevarría, the president of the University Students Federation. The Directorate, which mainly comprised students, carried out an attack on the presidential palace in March 1957, in which Echevarria died.

The PSP was very slow to join the struggle against Batista. According to Hugh Thomas, the PSP leaders “denounced Batista but were slow to do anything more”.⁸ The PSP denounced Castro’s attack on the Moncada barracks as a “putsch”. The PSP remained legal until November 1953, when it was banned, apparently because of US pressure rather than because Batista viewed it as a serious threat.⁹ The ban was not enforced very strictly.

Some members of the PSP and Socialist Youth opposed the party’s conservative policy, but it was not until 1958 that the policy changed fundamentally.

Fidel Castro

Fidel Castro, the son of a rich landowner, was a student at Havana University between 1945 and 1950. He later said: “At the university, which I arrived at with only a spirit of rebelliousness and some elementary ideas about justice, I became a revolutionary, I became a Marxist-Leninist, and I acquired sentiments and values which I still hold today and for which I have struggled throughout my life.”¹⁰

He became active in student politics. He was elected by his fellow students as a class representative, and became increasingly involved in a struggle for control of the FEU between supporters and opponents of the Grau government. The FEU leadership, which at that time was pro-government, at one stage threatened Castro with death if he set foot on campus. He defied these threats and his opponents backed off.¹¹

Castro, influenced by the ideas of José Martí, was interested in democratic and anti-imperialist struggles throughout Latin America. He became chairperson of the FEU’s committee for Dominican democracy, which campaigned against the dictatorship of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. He did not confine himself to propaganda against Trujillo, but when he heard about a proposed expedition of armed Cuban and Dominican democracy fighters to overthrow the dictator, he joined up and participated in military training on an island off Cuba’s coast. The expedition was a fiasco, but the

experience helped him develop his ideas on how to carry out an armed insurrection against a dictatorship.

Castro became involved in efforts to build links with students in other Latin America countries, with the aim of establishing a Latin America-wide student federation. In pursuit of this goal, he visited Venezuela, Panama and Colombia. He happened to be in Colombia in 1948, at the time when that country's most popular political leader, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, was murdered. This provoked a spontaneous popular uprising in Bogotá. Crowds stormed police stations and seized weapons. Castro joined in the uprising.

Castro graduated as a lawyer in 1950. However, practising law was not his main interest.

While at university he had joined the Cuban Peoples Party (also known as the Ortodoxos). Over time, as Castro studied Marxism, he began to recognise the limitations of the Ortodoxo Party. Nevertheless, he maintained links with it, because many of its members and supporters were radical-minded workers, students and poor people, whose support Castro wanted to win.

Castro was chosen to be a parliamentary candidate of the Ortodoxo Party in elections planned for May 1952. (These elections were cancelled after Batista's coup of March 1952)

When the elections were cancelled, Castro began preparing for an armed uprising. He recruited 1200 young people, mainly drawn from the Ortodoxo youth, and gave them some very elementary military training.

Castro says that during this period, he was a "professional revolutionary ... I was devoting my full time to the revolution".¹² As a lawyer, he defended some poor people in court, but did not charge them a fee. He was financially supported by his comrades in the revolutionary movement.

During this period Castro organised "a small circle of Marxist studies" for some of his closest collaborators.¹³

The attack on the Moncada Barracks

On July 25, 1953 Castro called on 160 of the members of his group to gather at a farm outside Santiago, Cuba's second-largest city. Early next morning they carried out an attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago, as well as on a barracks in the city of Bayamo.

Castro hoped that with the advantage of surprise his forces could take the Moncada barracks with little or no bloodshed, then use the army's own internal communications channels to promote rebellion, or at least cause confusion, among soldiers around the

country. He also planned to issue a call for a general strike against Batista. He was hopeful that the combination of a general strike and rebellion by sections of the army would be able to overthrow Batista.¹⁴

The attacks failed. Some of the attackers died in the fighting; others were murdered by Batista's forces after being captured. Others, including Castro, were taken prisoner and put on trial

Castro's ideas

There is a commonly held view in the Trotskyist movement that Castro was just a radical bourgeois democrat at the time of the struggle against Batista. Even Joseph Hansen, one of the best Trotskyist writers on Cuba, assumes that Castro was not a Marxist prior to 1959.

However, Castro was very much influenced by Marxism at the time of the attack on the Moncada barracks. In his 1985 interview with Frei Betto, Castro stated: "I had already acquired a Marxist outlook when we attacked the Moncada garrison. I had fairly well-developed revolutionary ideas, acquired while I was at university through my contact with revolutionary literature".¹⁵ This revolutionary literature included some of the writings of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Castro added that "my contribution to the Cuban revolution consists of having synthesised Martí's ideas and those of Marxism-Leninism and of having applied them consistently in our struggle".¹⁶

Castro explained his decision not to join the PSP, but to work initially in the framework of the Ortodoxo Party, as follows:

I saw that the Cuban communists were isolated due to the pervasive atmosphere of imperialism, McCarthyism and reactionary politics. No matter what they did they remained isolated ...

So, I worked out a strategy for carrying out a deep social revolution — but gradually, by stages ...

I realised that the masses were decisive, that the masses were extremely angry and discontented. They did not understand the social essence of the problem; they were confused. They attributed unemployment, poverty, and the lack of schools, hospitals, job opportunities and housing — almost everything — to administrative corruption, embezzlement and the perversity of the politicians.

The Cuban Peoples Party had harnessed much of that discontent, but they did not particularly blame the capitalist system and imperialism for it ...

The people were confused, but they were also desperate and able to fight ... The people had to be led along the road of revolution by stages, step by step, until they achieved full political consciousness and confidence in their future.

I worked out all these ideas by reading and studying Cuban history, the Cuban personality and distinguishing characteristics, and Marxism.¹⁷

Trial & imprisonment

Castro used his defence speech at his trial for the attack on the Moncada barracks to explain the goals for which he was fighting. The speech, later published under the title *History Will Absolve Me!*, outlined his program.

Castro called for the “restoration of civil liberties and political democracy”, which had been suppressed by Batista’s coup. He also advocated granting land to landless tenant farmers, making this land “not mortgageable and not transferable”. For wage workers, Castro proposed “the right to share 30% of the profits of all large industrial, mercantile and mining companies, including the sugar mills”. He advocated “the confiscation of all holdings and ill-gotten gains of those who had committed frauds during previous regimes, as well as the holdings and ill-gotten gains of their legatees and heirs”. To implement this, he advocated special revolutionary courts to look into the records of all corporations and banks.

Castro advocated the “nationalisation of the electric power trust and the telephone trust [which were US-owned], refund to the people of the illegal [excessive] rates these companies have charged, and payment to the treasury of all taxes brazenly evaded in the past”.¹⁸

He also advocated setting a maximum amount of land to be held by each type of agricultural enterprise, and redistributing the remainder amongst peasant families; promoting agricultural cooperatives; cutting all house rents in half; and building new houses for city residents.

This was not a socialist program, but a radical democratic program. Castro later said that if the program had been more radical, “the revolutionary movement against Batista would not have obtained the breadth that it achieved and that made victory possible”.¹⁹

Castro was sent to prison on the Isle of Pines, where he was able to read the writings of Marx and Lenin much more extensively, and deepen his understanding of Marxist theory

Meanwhile Castro’s supporters outside the prison defied Batista’s repressive laws by publishing *History Will Absolve Me!* and distributing tens of thousands of copies. They built a mass movement demanding freedom for all political prisoners, including the Moncada veterans.

The July 26 Movement

Fidel Castro and 18 other Moncada veterans were released from prison under an amnesty on 15 May 1955. Castro immediately set to work creating a new revolutionary organisation, the July 26 Movement. He aimed to unite those willing to carry out revolutionary struggle against the dictatorship, and succeeded in winning the support of many, including veterans of the MNR, such as Armando Hart and Faustino Perez, as well as Frank País, who led a revolutionary organisation based in Oriente province in eastern Cuba.

Castro continued to believe in the need for an armed insurrection to overthrow Batista. Nevertheless, before launching an armed struggle, he tested out the possibilities for peaceful methods of struggle.

The government soon showed that it had not changed. It banned a proposed mass rally. It banned Fidel Castro from appearing on radio and television. It closed down a newspaper that printed revelations about the army's murder of prisoners following the attack on the Moncada barracks. It began once again making arrests of opponents of the regime. And it began again to murder its opponents. Jorge Agostini, an army officer who had resigned following Batista's coup and become a campaigner against his regime, was murdered in June 1955 by Batista's thugs.²⁰

After two months of growing repression, it was clear that the removal of the Batista regime by peaceful means was not possible. On July 7 Castro left Cuba and went to Mexico. There he and his followers carried out military training in preparation for a return to Cuba to overthrow the dictatorship. While in Mexico Castro met Che Guevara and persuaded him to join the planned expedition.

In August 1955 Castro issued a manifesto containing a 15-point program of reforms, including distribution of land among peasant families, nationalisation of public services, mass education, and industrialisation.

Meanwhile in Cuba itself the July 26 Movement was being built as an underground organisation throughout the country. Armando Hart, a key leader of this work, comments that: "All over the country, the organisation of the Movement continued to advance. In the weeks preceding the *Granma* [which reached Cuba on December 2, 1956] there was no municipality or corner of the island without its underground leadership and cell."²¹

In May 1956 the J26M began publishing an illegal newspaper, initially called *Aldabonazo*, then *Revolucion*. The first editorial said: "For the July 26 Movement, only those who aim at something more than simply toppling the dictatorship are capable of really eliminating it ... The July 26 Movement asserts that the current government is not the cause but the result of the republic's fundamental crisis ... It would hardly be

worthwhile to confront the dictatorial, corrupt and mediocre regime we suffer without aiming for a revolutionary transformation of the moral, political, economic and social causes that made possible the criminal act committed by the seditious group” (i.e. Batista’s coup).²²

Thus the J26M aimed at radical social change. But most of its activists did not regard themselves as Marxists. They were radical democrats. They were concerned about social justice, not just formal political democracy. But in the beginning most did not have a clear socialist perspective.

Over time, many of them evolved towards socialist ideas. But some did not. Some later turned against the revolution as it began to enter the socialist stage.

Fidel Castro, the central leader of the J26M, was a Marxist, but did not say so publicly. Some other leaders such as Raúl Castro and Che Guevara were also Marxists. But the J26M also included some people who were strongly anti-communist. US author Julia Sweig notes that: “Anti-communism within the 26th of July cadre itself was common, both because of the Cold War climate of the 1950s and because the PSP, officially banned in 1952, had a reputation for having collaborated with Batista from the 1930s.”²³

Strategy of the J26M

While the program of the J26M was bourgeois-democratic, its methods of struggle were militant. The J26M’s perspective was to build up towards a general strike and popular insurrection. The second manifesto of the July 26 Movement to the Cuban people, issued in 1956, called for workers to be organised from the bottom in revolutionary groups in order to declare a general strike.

Fidel Castro was strongly committed to this perspective, and spoke or wrote about it many times. In a message dated December 14, 1957, Castro said: “The workers section of the July 26 Movement is involved in organising strike committees in every work centre and every sector of industry, together with opposition elements from all organisations that are prepared to join the strike ...”²⁴

Che Guevara was also enthusiastic about the goal of a general strike. He wrote that: “The revolutionary general strike is the definitive weapon, the intercontinental rocket of the peoples.”²⁵

But when the July 26 Movement was launched in 1955, it was still a long way from being able to put into practice the plan for a revolutionary general strike. This was due both to its still limited roots in the working class, and to the political limitations of many of its cadres.

Strikes

Mujal's control of the trade union movement made it difficult for the J26M to build a strong base in the unions. Nevertheless the J26M did participate in strike action and strike solidarity where possible.

In September 1955 there was a series of bank strikes led by opponents of Batista, including J26M member Enrique Hart, who was arrested and kept in prison until the strikes were over.²⁶

In December 1955 there was a strike of over 200,000 sugar workers, in protest at a government move that would have reduced their wages. Strike leaders included members of the PSP and the J26M, and even some pro-Mujal union officials who felt the need to support the strike to maintain some support in the rank and file.²⁷

The strike received broad solidarity, including from students. According to J26M leader Armando Hart, "A number of towns were virtually taken over by the strikers and supporters. Virtually all economic activity in these towns was paralysed, leading them to be termed 'dead cities'".²⁸

Batista was forced to concede to the strikers demands.

Castro returns

Fidel Castro and 81 supporters set sail for Cuba on 24 November, 1956 in the yacht *Granma*, reaching the Cuban coast (later than expected) on December 2.

On November 30, the J26M urban underground carried out armed attacks on army and police buildings in Santiago. There was also industrial action by some workers in Oriente province, including a 24 hour strike in the town of Guantánamo. These actions were intended to coincide with the landing of the *Granma*, thereby distracting Batista's army from attacking Castro's forces before they could reach the relative safety of the mountains.

However, the Santiago uprising was crushed before the *Granma* reached the Cuban coast. Most of Castro's fighters were killed or captured shortly after the landing. Castro and a few others survived, and a guerrilla front was established in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra.

The guerrilla force gradually expanded. J26M activists, including survivors of the Santiago uprising, came from the cities to join the guerrillas. The peasants increasingly supported the guerrillas, and some joined the Rebel Army. But it did not become simply a peasant army. It included a large proportion of workers, including both agricultural labourers from the sugar and coffee plantations and workers who had come from the cities to join the guerrillas.²⁹

The J26M continued to build a strong urban underground network, which sent

supplies, money, and recruits for guerrillas; carried out propaganda in the cities; organised strikes and protests; and carried out acts of sabotage and armed attacks on Batista's police and army in urban areas.

The J26M urban underground organised protests against police murders. For example, on January 2, 1957 the body of William Soler, a teenager, was found in the streets of Santiago. He had been murdered by the police after being arrested. Underground activist Armando Hart describes what happened: "This crime caused great popular indignation, and Santiago became a boiling pot. The idea was raised of holding a women's demonstration along Enramada Street at the beginning of 1957, and we all went to work organising it. It was an event that showed the strength the July 26 Movement already had among the masses. The men lined the sidewalks, and the women marched through the streets. There were huge banners denouncing the intolerable situation and demanding there be no more murders."³⁰

The J26M also used public protests, or the threat of them, to prevent the police and army murdering captured activists. When Armando Hart and two others were arrested by the army in January 1958, the J26M took over a radio station and broadcast the news so the army could not kill them secretly in a fake "battle", as they had been planning to do.³¹

Preparing for a general strike

The idea of a general strike was a central tenet of J26M strategy. However the first attempts to actually implement this perspective were unsuccessful or only partially successful.

The J26M had only a weak presence in the union movement in Havana at the time of the Granma landing, despite widespread sympathy amongst workers for its goals. The movement's influence in the working class was stronger in Santiago, and in Oriente province (of which Santiago was the capital), in part for historical reasons (according to Armando Hart, "the population there had been radically Fidelista since the days of Moncada")³² and in part because of the consistent political work of Frank País and his comrades. There was also a better relationship between the J26M and the PSP in Santiago than in Havana. By mid-1957, according to US author Julia Sweig, "Local labour cells [in Oriente] had already carried out mini-shutdowns, and walkouts were operating under a real structure ..."³³

The Frente Obrero Nacional (National Workers Front) was set up by the J26M in 1957. Its role was to prepare for the general strike. But it was still far from being strong enough to achieve this goal. It remained weak in Havana.

The CTC was still firmly controlled by Mujal, while the PSP, which had a following

amongst sections of the working class, was hostile to the J26M. This hostility was reciprocated. Many of the leaders of the J26M urban underground were so hostile to the PSP that they did not want to cooperate with it in any way. The situation was better in Santiago than in Havana.

Attempted general strikes

There were two attempts at a nationwide general strike before the eventual victorious strike of January 1959.

On July 30, 1957 Frank País, the leader of the J26M urban underground in Santiago, Cuba's second largest city, was murdered by the police. This triggered a spontaneous strike in the city. All stores in Santiago closed in protest. Tens of thousands followed the funeral cortege to the cemetery.

According to Armando Hart, a leader of the urban underground, "Beginning on that day, a powerful strike movement broke out in Santiago and throughout Oriente".³⁴ However attempts to spread the strike action across Cuba had only limited success.

The J26M national leadership called a general strike for August 5, 1957. The strike was in general not effective in Havana, though electrical plant workers, telephone workers, bank employees and several bus lines did go on strike.

The J26M called another general strike in April 1958. This strike failed. According to Sweig:

At eleven in the morning of April 9, 1958, the 26th of July Movement interrupted Havana and Santiago radio stations to broadcast a call for a general strike. Precious few workers walked out of their jobs in the capital, where poorly armed militia attacked an armoury in Old Havana and other targets. Almost without exception, police gunfire eliminated the commandos. Sabotage to the city's main circuit board caused temporary blackouts from Old Havana to the Vedado district. By late afternoon though, most bus routes had resumed their normal schedules, businesses and banks had reopened, and workers had completed their afternoon shifts. According to one report, not one factory or business in Havana had shut down as a result of worker walkouts, and the movement's militia took the brunt of police violence deployed to counter their sabotage ...

In Santiago de Cuba workers did strike, but by afternoon employers had already begun to replace them ... Fearing that striking workers might lose their jobs without having accomplished anything, on April 10 Vilma Espín issued a "back-to-work" order in Santiago and notified Havana to call off the strike.³⁵

The failure of the strike showed that the J26M on its own did not have sufficient organised support in the working class to call a nationwide strike. The J26M had called the strike without consulting other organisations, including most importantly the PSP.

The PSP opposed the strike, saying it was premature and had not been properly built.

J26M & PSP

The mutual hostility between the J26M and the PSP was due to two factors: on the one hand, the cold war anti-communist attitudes that prevailed amongst many J26M activists; on the other hand, the Stalinist politics of the PSP and its very dubious historical role in the revolutionary struggle in Cuba. In the 1930s the CP had made an alliance with Batista, and between 1940 and 1944 had participated in his government. In 1953 the PSP condemned the attack on the Moncada barracks as “putschism” and “petty bourgeois adventurism”.³⁶

The PSP was slow to join struggle against Batista. In October 1956, shortly before the Granma set out for Cuba, the PSP sent emissaries to Castro in Mexico warning him that conditions weren't right for an armed struggle in Cuba. According to Jon Lee Anderson, the author of a biography of Che Guevara, “they tried to win Fidel's agreement to join forces in a gradual campaign of civil dissent leading up to an armed insurrection — in which the PSP would also participate. He refused and told them he would go ahead with his plans, but hoped the party and its militants would support him nonetheless by carrying out uprisings upon his rebel army's arrival in Cuba”.³⁷

However, according to J.P. Morray, a US leftist writer generally sympathetic towards the PSP: “Public declarations of the Cuban Communist Party as late as July 1957 showed that it opposed his [Castro's] insurrectionary tactics; and not until February 1958 did it acknowledge the utility of the guerrilla struggle.”³⁸

The PSP was internally divided over the question of collaboration with the J26M. The party's line began to change in late 1957 and early 1958. In February 1958 it expressed support for Castro's guerrillas while condemning the tactics of the J26M urban underground. The PSP said that the latter relied too much on militia sabotage, fighting the police, etc., rather than winning the support of workers to take action themselves.³⁹ These criticisms had considerable validity, especially in Havana.

By early 1958 a number of PSP members had come to the guerrilla zones and joined the Rebel Army, in particular Che Guevara's and Raúl Castro's columns.

When the J26M announced its intention to call a strike in April 1958, the PSP expressed their willingness to support it. However when the J26M urban underground rejected any involvement by the PSP in organising the strike, the PSP ignored the strike call. Some PSP members reportedly doxxed in J26M strike organisers to police.⁴⁰

Why did the April 1958 strike fail?

After the defeat of the strike, there was discussion within the J26M about the reasons

for the failure. At a meeting of the J26M National Directorate, held in the Sierra Maestra liberated zone on May 3, 1958, there was a detailed discussion of the reasons for the defeat. Some of the key leaders of the J26M urban underground were criticised, by Che Guevara amongst others, for sectarianism in refusing to work with the PSP. They were also criticised for the tactics which they used in trying to build the strike.

The J26M urban underground had tried to make up for its lack of deep roots in the working class in Havana, and its resulting lack of ability to organise workers to take a collective decision to go on strike, by using its militia. The theory held by at least some sections of the urban underground was that gun battles in the streets between police and the J26M militia would give workers an excuse to stay home from work.⁴¹ The rationale was that workers wanted to strike but were scared of being sacked or arrested if they did. The street fighting would give them a pretext for staying away from work without openly admitting to their employer and the police that they supported the aims of the strike.

Faustino Perez, a key leader of the urban underground, outlined some of the mistakes made in organising the strike in a letter he wrote in October 1958. One mistake was that, although the J26M had announced its intention to call a general strike, the date of the strike was kept secret: “We kept the agreed-upon date a secret, supposedly for the sake of the militias’ action, and we made a fleeting announcement at a time — 11am — when only a few housewives were listening to the radio ... We caught our own cadres of the organisation by surprise ... as well as the people as a whole”.⁴²

According to Bonachea and San Martín,⁴³ the original intention was that the strike call would be issued at noon, when many workers had gone home for their midday break (siesta). Fighting in the streets would give them an excuse to stay home. But in fact the strike call was issued at 11am, when most workers were still at work. Presumably the hope was that the workers would take a collective decision to go home and not come back. This seems to have happened in Santiago but not in Havana.

Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, a PSP leader who became a strong advocate of an alliance with the J26M, points out that workers had a lot to lose by going on a political strike, and hence would not do so unless they had confidence in the organisation that called the strike. They risked being sacked, and as Rodríguez points out: “the loss of a job may have signified for any of them the fall into misery, from which they might not recover for the rest of their lives, since for each employed worker there were three workers looking for a job.

“This situation caused the urban workers, above all those in Havana, to demand guarantees of seriousness and organisation before they would launch themselves into

a strike movement which, if it was not sufficiently prepared, would culminate in an easy defeat and irreversible misery for themselves.”⁴⁴

In April 1958 the J26M was not yet able to give such “guarantees of seriousness and organisation”.

Some writers have accused Fidel Castro of pressuring a reluctant urban underground leadership into calling the April 1958 strike, knowing it would be defeated, in order to discredit the urban leadership, which Castro allegedly saw as potential rivals. For example, Bonachea and San Martin assert that: “It can be stated unequivocally that Fidel Castro was responsible for the conception of the strike and its failure”.⁴⁵ US author Julia Sweig however, after examining the Cuban archives, shows that the reverse was the case — it was the urban leadership that persuaded Castro that the time was ripe for calling the strike.⁴⁶ Similarly, former underground activist Armando Hart, in his book *Aldabonazo*, reprints a letter from Faustino Perez, a key urban underground leader, who explains that the date of the strike was set after discussion between the Havana and Santiago leaderships.⁴⁷

Lessons of the April defeat

Following the failure of the April 1958 strike, the leadership of the July 26 Movement realised that any future general strike had to be much better prepared and should only occur when objective conditions were ripe. But they never renounced the idea of a general strike. This is clear from Che Guevara’s account of the J26M leadership meeting held on May 3, 1958 to discuss the failure of the strike.⁴⁸

Summarising the discussion at the meeting, Che said: “The analysis of the strike demonstrated that subjectivism and putschist conceptions permeated its preparation and execution. The formidable apparatus that the July 26 Movement seemed to have in its hands, in the form of organised workers’ cells, fell apart the moment the action took place”.

Che explained that the leaders of the J26M urban underground had made a number of errors. They had been “opposed to any participation by the Popular Socialist Party in the organisation of the struggle”. This had led to “the conception of a sectarian strike, in which the other revolutionary movements would be forced to follow our lead”. They had also thought it would be possible for the capital city to be seized by J26M militias, “without closely examining the forces of reaction inside their principal bastion”.⁴⁹

The meeting “raised the need for unity of all working class forces to prepare the next revolutionary general strike, which would be called from the Sierra” (i.e., from the mountains, where Fidel Castro was based).⁵⁰

Che added that the movement “did away with various naive illusions of attempted revolutionary general strikes when the situation had not matured sufficiently to bring about an explosion of that type, and without having laid the groundwork of adequate preparations for an event of that magnitude”.⁵¹

Following this meeting the J26M changed its policy and began trying to work with the PSP in preparing for a new general strike, to be called when the conditions for success were present. The PSP had by this time changed its policy and agreed to work with the J26M. Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, a prominent leader of the PSP, went into the mountains to meet with Fidel, and reached agreement on collaboration in a common struggle against Batista. The J26M’s National Workers Front was merged with the CP-led Committees for the Defence of Workers Demands to form FONU (the United National Workers Front).

In the meantime the guerrilla struggle continued in the countryside. For Castro and Guevara, guerrilla warfare was not counterposed to urban mass struggle. Rather the guerrilla struggle, by weakening Batista’s army, would help prepare the conditions for a successful general strike.

Conferences of workers’ representatives were held in two of the liberated zones (northern Oriente and Yaguajay). A plan for a third such conference in the Sierra Maestre had to be cancelled due to a government military offensive. However, between August and December 1958 Fidel Castro had meetings with a numerous workers representatives who came to the Sierra to meet him.

There were also numerous meetings of workers and peasants in particular local areas. For example, in Las Villas province, where a guerrilla column led by Camilo Cienfuegos was operating, “A *comision obrera* (workers committee) was formed and affiliated with Column No. 2. Its objectives were to eliminate the official pro-Mujal leadership in the sugar mills; hold free elections in the unions; and to draw up a list of demands and supervise their fulfilment with the support of the rebel army. By November, Cienfuegos was able to preside over a meeting attended by about 800 sugar workers from the San Agustin and the Adela sugar mills. On November 28, Major William Galvez presided over a meeting of 500 delegates representing workers from seven sugar mills in the region. The following day, a peasant congress attracted over 300 participants, and the *asociacion campesina* (peasant association) was organised”.⁵²

Castro’s ‘obsession’: destroying the old state apparatus

Towards the end of 1958, the guerrillas were inflicting major defeats on Batista’s troops and rapidly expanding the liberated zones. According to Carlos Rafael

Rodríguez, the plan for a general strike was central to Fidel's thinking at that time. The goal was to "paralyse the life of the nation until all power had passed into the hands of the revolution, and not just a fragment [of power]".⁵³

According to Rodríguez, the need to "destroy the political apparatus of the dominant classes" was "practically an obsession for Fidel Castro in the final days of 1958".⁵⁴ Fidel's thinking on this issue was influenced both by his reading of Marx's writings on the Paris Commune, and by the practical experience of Latin America, where revolutions which overthrew a dictatorship but left the old army intact were sooner or later followed by a counter-coup carried out by army officers for the benefit of imperialism and the oligarchy.

The insurrection

By the end of 1958, the guerrilla forces controlled much of the country and were advancing on Havana. The US, realising that Batista could no longer control the situation, began trying to bring about his replacement by a new government, comprising people who were less discredited than Batista, but still favourable to US interests.

According to Bonachea and San Martín, "... since November, the US government had been taking urgent steps to remove Batista from power while trying to prevent Fidel Castro from taking over."⁵⁵ Initially Batista resisted, but around 2am on January 1, 1959 he flew into exile, handing over power to one of his officers, General Eulogio Cantillo.

Castro responded to these events by ordering guerrillas led by Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos to advance on Havana, and by calling a general strike to coincide with the entry of the guerrillas into the cities. In a radio broadcast on January 1, Castro called on "the people of Cuba, especially all workers" to "immediately make preparations for a general strike, to begin throughout the country on January 2, supporting the revolutionary forces and thus guaranteeing the total victory of the revolution". He urged Cuban workers to "organise themselves in the factories and other workplaces to bring the country to a halt at dawn".⁵⁶

According to historian Hugh Thomas: "On 2 January the 26th of July Movement had called for a general strike to mark the end of the old regime, and in Havana and most cities this was fairly complete. In Havana the rebel trade union FONU ... called for mass demonstrations ... The rebel committees in all unions came out into the open ... The old CTC leaders compromised with Batista, Mujal at their head, had fled into hiding ... In the next few days all the unions reformed themselves with new leaders ... Militants of the 26th of July and Directorio took over as de facto police. Offices of newspapers which had backed Batista were occupied."⁵⁷

The general strike is sometimes dismissed as irrelevant because Batista had already left the country. But General Cantillo was attempting to create a new military-dominated government that would preserve the institutions of the bourgeois state. The general strike, which was effective throughout Cuba, developed into an insurrection that helped destroy the old state apparatus. Batista's army and police disintegrated.

According to Bonachea and San Martín: "... the people answered Castro's call for a general strike with jubilation. The country's paralysis was universal, and nothing indicated that Cantillo's orders to go back to work would be obeyed, or the streets would be cleared of throngs of elated Cubans. All the police precincts had surrendered to the urban fighters ... The very possibility of a struggle to death for control of Havana was so discouraging to the regular troops that many started abandoning the perimeters of the military bases, changing into civilian clothes and putting some safe distance between dangerous areas and themselves".⁵⁸

When Cantillo realised he could not control the situation, he handed over control of the army to Colonel Ramón Barquín, who had been jailed for an attempted military rebellion against Batista. The aim was to preserve the army as an institution by giving it a new leadership. Barquín tried to negotiate with the J26M. But when the Rebel Army continued to advance and Batista's army continued to disintegrate, Barquín surrendered.

Fidel Castro later said the general strike made "a decisive contribution to victory".⁵⁹

Dismantling the old state apparatus

After the insurrection Castro moved immediately to dismantle two of the key institutions of the old state apparatus. The old army and police were disbanded and replaced by new army and police, whose initial cadres were drawn from the Rebel Army and the urban underground. Some members of the old army and police who were not guilty of serious crimes under the old regime and were sympathetic to the revolution were allowed to join the new army and police, after a rigorous selection process. But the army and police were led by people who had been anti-Batista fighters.⁶⁰

Over the next year or two, a peoples militia was created and Committees for the Defence of the Revolution were organised on a block-by-block basis. Cuban academic and diplomat German Sanchez summarises these developments as follows: "The repressive agencies of the former regime were eliminated and new defence organizations, based on revolutionary vigilance, were established with the essential involvement of ordinary people."⁶¹

Castro and his supporters also encouraged workers and peasants to mobilise through their mass organisations (such as unions) to demand and actually carry out

radical social changes.

The new government

After the insurrection Manuel Urrutia became provisional president. Urrutia had been a judge who had defied Batista during a trial of J26M members involved in the *Granma* expedition and the November 1956 Santiago insurrection. As one of three judges, he issued a dissenting verdict arguing that the rebellion against tyranny was justified.

Despite his opposition to Batista, Urrutia was basically conservative, and he appointed a cabinet consisting mainly of conservative lawyers and politicians headed by prime minister José Miró Cardona. Fidel Castro was not part of this cabinet.

While allowing the government to pass into the hands of bourgeois figures, Castro encouraged mass mobilisations that put them under pressure to carry out radical reforms. Conflicts arose over issues such as land reform. Castro mobilised the workers and peasants to break the resistance of conservative elements within the government. In the course of 1959 there were four more general strikes in support of Castro and his radical reform program. These strikes, called by the CTC (which was now led by J26M activists), occurred on January 21, March 13, July 23 and October 25.⁶²

On February 16, 1959 Miró Cardona resigned and was replaced as prime minister by Fidel Castro. Over the following months a series of other bourgeois figures resigned from positions in the cabinet, civil service, etc.

During July a conflict between Castro and Urrutia led to huge mass mobilisations. Urrutia had given press conferences and media interviews claiming that communists were causing “terrible harm” to Cuba. He claimed that Fidel Castro agreed with his anti-communist views, apparently trying to divide Castro from the PSP and thereby weaken the left.

On July 16 Castro resigned as prime minister. Next day he went on TV and accused Urrutia of using the supposed communist threat to create a pretext for future US intervention in Cuba.

In response to Castro’s speech, crowds gathered outside the presidential palace demanding that Urrutia resign, which he soon did.

Castro then announced that his own political future would be decided at a mass meeting to be held in Havana’s civic plaza on July 26.

On July 23 a strike called by the CTC demanded Castro’s return to power. On July 26 the mass meeting in the civic plaza attracted a huge crowd, estimated at one million, who cheered the announcement of Castro’s return as prime minister. This reflected mass support for Castro’s revolutionary policies.

During 1959 the government introduced a range of measures that benefited the poor. Wages were increased, with the lower paid workers benefiting disproportionately. Rents were cut, as were electricity and phone charges. Tax changes benefited the poor. Protection against unfair dismissal was extended to all workers, and the social security system was expanded.

Private beaches were opened to the public. Private clubs were handed over to unions for the enjoyment of their members. Workers benefited from cheaper health services, expanded educational opportunities, and additional child care centres.

The increased rights of workers to challenge unfair dismissals led to an increase in the number of claims, rising to over 40,000 cases. Labour disputes were nearly always resolved in favour of the workers. According to Efren Cordova, a US citizen of Cuban origin, such disputes led to the bankruptcy of some employers, resulting in the seizure of their enterprises by the government.⁶³

Cordova accuses Castro of deliberately stirring up industrial disputes in the initial months of the revolution. He claims that: "... Castro and his colleagues were apparently intent on arousing workers' expectations and fomenting a climate of tension ... The prime minister referred on various occasions to the employers' lack of observance of labour legislation, to the inclination of wealthy men to send their money abroad and to do little for Cuba, and to the unfair treatment accorded to various sectors of the working class"⁶⁴

Castro himself said: "The Cuban people actually acquired a socialist awareness with the development of the revolution and the violent class struggle that was unleashed at the national and international levels. This struggle served to develop the conscience of the masses; they were able to realise in a few months what only a minority had previously been able to understand after decades of ruthless exploitation".⁶⁵

Land reform & nationalisation of industry

In *History Will Absolve Me*, Castro had spoken of the nationalisation of US-owned electricity and phone companies, and of the confiscation of property obtained by fraud. He also spoke of the redistribution of the land of the big landowners to small peasants.

Land reform began soon after the overthrow of Batista. Initially the revolutionaries had intended to simply divide up the land of big landowners amongst the small peasants. This was done in many areas.

But the workers in the big sugar plantations had been wage earners, not tenant farmers. Many had been involved in unions since the 1930s. Their consciousness was proletarian, not petty-bourgeois. Surveys showed that most sugar cane workers wanted

job security as wage earners rather than becoming peasant farmers. They wanted a small plot of land for growing their own food (indeed many had already won this through union struggles) but were happy for the sugar plantations to be run as state farms. Hence when the big sugar plantations were taken over they became state property. Thus the state became owner of 40% of Cuba's land.

The confiscation of assets gained by fraud also put some productive assets in the hands of the state. Some capitalist property was also taken over by the state in response to violations of labour laws by the owners.

The measures described above, while affecting particular capitalists, did not mean the abolition of capitalism as a system. A substantial part of the economy still remained privately owned, and in theory there was no reason why capitalist economic relations could not have continued indefinitely.

However the reaction of US imperialism and the Cuban capitalists to these measures set in motion a struggle which culminated in the expropriation of virtually all capitalist property.

The US government responded to the confiscation of US-owned sugar plantations by cutting the quota for Cuban sugar imports into the USA. Eventually all Cuban trade with the United States was totally banned.

Cuba responded to the threat to its trade with the US by signing a trade agreement with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union supplied Cuba with cheap oil. But the US-owned refineries in Cuba refused to process Soviet crude oil. The Cuban government responded by taking over the refineries.

Similarly when Cuban capitalists acted in ways that sabotaged the economy their property was also confiscated.

In August 1960 all US-owned industrial and agrarian enterprises were nationalised. In October 1960 all remaining capitalists employing more than 25 people were expropriated.

Carlos Rafael Rodríguez argues that October 1960 marked a decisive turning point — the transition from a bourgeois-democratic revolution to a socialist revolution.

He says: "... despite their depth and breadth, the nationalisations carried out up to August 1960 did not go beyond the bourgeois-democratic limits of the revolution, even though ... they constituted ... an important preparatory step towards the socialist revolution".⁶⁶ He adds that: "The measures adopted up to August 1960 did not make impossible the continuation in Cuba of bourgeois forms of property."⁶⁷

Rodríguez argues that October 1960 saw "a qualitative change in the process of nationalisation".⁶⁸ The nationalisations of October 1960 hit the big Cuban capitalists "in their character as such" — that is, they were nationalised, not because of specific

things the capitalists had done, but because the government wanted to destroy the economic power of the capitalist class.

Rodríguez does not however argue that the extent of nationalisation on its own defined Cuba as socialist. He says:

It may be asked: when does a socialist content really arise in a revolution? ... nationalisation on its own does not constitute the rise of socialism ... it is necessary that in a greater or lesser part of the economy of the country capitalist relations of production — based on exploitation — are replaced by socialist relations, based on common interest and cooperation. This depends on the fundamental means of production having passed to the representatives of the people, in particular the proletariat, through the constitution of a political power of the working class, since only in this way will it be possible to eliminate the old capitalist relations and initiate socialist ones.

Both conditions were present in Cuba in October 1960. The state that nationalised had ceased to be a form of domination by the bourgeoisie and had been converted into a new state in which the workers and peasants were the dominant social forces and in which the ideology of the proletariat prevailed.⁶⁹

Rodríguez points out that creating this new state had required an intense struggle during the period from January 1959 to October 1960.

Active role of workers and peasants

Left critics of Castro often portray the expropriation of capitalist property as simply a matter of the government passing a few laws. The reality was that workers and peasants were actively involved in carrying out the expropriations. The peasants took over the land, and the workers — organised in the revolutionary militia — took over the factories.

Joaquín Bustelo (a US socialist from a Cuban exile family background) explains the role of the workers and peasants in carrying out the expropriation of capitalist property:

Who actually took over the land and drove out the landlord or his caretakers? The peasants themselves, organised and led by the agrarian reform delegates.

Who actually took over the more than 1000 enterprises that were expropriated on one day in October of 1960? The National Revolutionary Militias. Years later in Miami (former) Cuban capitalists were still complaining about how fundamentally unfair it was to have your OWN workers show up with guns and a nationalization order from the state.

Without the active, conscious and direct participation of the workers and peasants themselves in the transformation, what happened in Cuba was not possible. Who was

to run the factory, warehouse or other business the morning after the expropriation? Who could organise and reactivate production?

The idea that this was done by the cadre of a peasant-based rebel army of at most 1000 is preposterous. Tens of thousands of armed, disciplined workers took part in the takeover of factories, plants and warehouses simultaneously in October of 1960 through THEIR militia units and hundreds of thousands of workers took part in reactivating the workplaces over the next several days through their unions. There was, physically, in Cuba, in October of 1960, no one else who could have done it.⁷⁰

The active role of workers in the nationalisation of their own workplaces is confirmed by Efrén Cordova, an opponent of the socialist revolution. He writes:

Another device developed during this period [early 1960] was the direct occupation of the business concerned by the workers, following a real or fabricated dispute, as a pretext for government intervention ... The pattern for the takeover was for the workers to discuss with management a series of demands threatening a strike unless all of them were met. Usually included among the demands ... was an outright call for the management's resignation. When the demands were turned down, the group of workers involved proceeded to occupy the enterprise concerned. Street demonstrations usually followed the occupation.⁷¹

Social gains

From its inception the revolution had begun to bring economic and social benefits to workers, peasants and the poor (land reform, rent reduction, etc.) The expropriation of capitalist property enabled further social gains, including the virtual elimination of unemployment. As production for profit was increasingly replaced by production for human need, jobs were created for the unemployed.

Before the revolution the rate of unemployment was very high, though there were no accurate statistics. In rural areas a very large proportion of the workforce suffered seasonal unemployment, being employed at harvest time but unemployed in the off season.

A survey conducted in 1956-57 showed that 16.3% of the workforce was totally unemployed and 13.8% underemployed. However these figures understate the problem. For example "housewives" were not counted as unemployed, even if they wanted a paid job. Certainly during the off season the unemployment rate was much higher than 16.3%.⁷²

As a result of the revolution, agricultural workers gained permanent employment, and employment was expanded in urban industry and services. By 1970 unemployment had been reduced to 1.3%.⁷³

Before the revolution there were 52 different retirement insurance schemes. These schemes covered less than 50% of employees, and the benefits paid to retired workers varied markedly between schemes. Many schemes were subject to embezzlement by corrupt politicians and union leaders. Illness insurance did not exist.⁷⁴

Following the revolution the government took over these funds and amalgamated them into a single government-run system. In 1963 a new law established a social security system with universal coverage and providing not only retirement pensions but also coverage in the event of disease, industrial accidents, etc.⁷⁵

After the revolution, education became free and available to all. A literacy campaign was launched, with literacy teachers (often students from urban areas) going to remote villages to teach the peasants to read and write.

Similarly, health care became free and available to all. Before the revolution doctors mainly looked after the better-off sections of the population. Very few lived outside the main cities. Many doctors, because of their privileged economic position, were politically reactionary, and half of Cuba's 6000 doctors left the country within a few years after the revolution. But new generations of young people who supported the revolution were trained as doctors. By 2003 there were over 68,000 doctors,⁷⁶ and Cuba had built one of the best health care systems in the world. For example, infant mortality had declined from 60 per thousand in 1958 to 6.3 per thousand in 2003.⁷⁷

Cuba became a very egalitarian society. Jose Perez, a US socialist who visited Cuba in 1979, reported that workers were often paid more than administrators, because the workers got bonuses for surpassing production norms while the administrators did not.⁷⁸

US aggression

As the revolution deepened, US imperialism stepped up its attacks. From cuts to Cuba's sugar quota, the US moved rapidly to a total ban on all trade with Cuba. It also began preparing for an invasion aimed at overthrowing the Castro government and installing a new regime favourable to the interests of imperialism.

An invasion force of right wing Cuban exiles was armed and trained by the CIA. It was taken to the Cuban coast in US ships, and landed at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. However this force was totally defeated by the Cuban army and popular militia within three days.

Despite this setback the US continued its aggression. The CIA continued working with right-wing Cubans to carry out terrorist attacks in Cuba.

The Cuban government, anticipating a new invasion, this time on a much larger scale and involving the overt use of the US army, navy and air force, sought to

strengthen its alliance with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was allowed to set up missile bases in Cuba. For the Soviet leadership, these bases were seen as counterbalancing the numerous US missiles in countries such as Turkey and Italy aimed at the Soviet Union. For Cuba, the bases were seen as a deterrent to a US invasion.

This led to the so-called Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. The US imposed a naval blockade to prevent Soviet ships from sailing to Cuba. This had the potential to escalate into a nuclear war. To prevent this outcome, the Soviet leadership agreed to withdraw the missiles from Cuba, in return for the withdrawal of US missiles from Turkey and a US promise not to invade Cuba.

Differentiation within the J26M

As the revolution increasingly came into conflict with US imperialism and the Cuban capitalist class, and began to enter the socialist stage, the July 26 Movement split. Right-wing sections of the J26M allied themselves with US imperialism and became part of the counter-revolutionary forces, while the left-wing became openly socialist.

Although Fidel Castro and some other leaders of the J26M were Marxists, many other members and leaders of the movement were non-Marxist radical democrats during the period of the struggle against Batista. Morray describes their outlook as follows: "... their movement stood for social justice without the abolition of capitalism and without the creation of a proletarian dictatorship ... As for the class struggle, it was to be abolished ... 'liberty, equality and fraternity' would be introduced and respected by enlightened rich as well as poor, whose common interests abrogated class warfare."⁷⁹

However the intensification of the class struggle forced J26M activists to take sides, and led to a deepening division within the J26M. While the essential cause of the division was the deepening class struggle, the right wing of the J26M tried to focus attention on the "communist threat". They devoted a lot of effort to attacking the PSP and opposing any collaboration with it. They tried to use anti-communist ideology as a weapon to oppose the deepening radicalisation.

The PSP's dubious history made it in some ways an easy target. But the attack on the PSP was linked to an attempt to frighten people with the threat of communism and to discourage them from taking any steps on the road to a socialist revolution in Cuba. Furthermore, the rejection of collaboration with the PSP meant the maintenance of a disunited working class.

Differences within the J26M were apparent by as early as May 1959. According to Morray: "When the Rebel Army heroes Raúl Castro, Camilo Cienfuegos and Ernesto

Guevara (Fidel Castro was in Argentina) used the May Day speeches of 1959 to impress upon the workers the importance of ‘unity’ among the revolutionary forces, *Revolution* [the main J26M paper] published a series of columns over the signature ‘26th of July Movement, Havana Province’ rejecting ‘unity’ with the communists.”⁸⁰

The following months saw a deepening conflict within the J26M. A number of J26M leaders came out in opposition to Castro. Rebel Army officer Hubert Matos led an attempted military rebellion in October 1959, and was supported by sections of the J26M.

However the majority of J26M members continued to support Castro, and were won to support his policy of deepening the democratic revolution and beginning the transition to socialism. Morray explains that: “The students, intellectuals, young professionals, school teachers, and labour leaders who formed the bulk of the 26th of July [Movement] had no great economic stake in capitalism. That is why so many of them were able to follow Castro into the socialist United Party that the revolution would ultimately bring forth. A Bolshevik revolution posed no economic threat to them, as it did to the national bourgeoisie”.⁸¹

Similar divisions to those in the J26M also emerged in the Revolutionary Directorate. The left wing of the J26M, the left wing of the Directorate, and the PSP increasingly worked together, under the leadership of Fidel Castro.

Subsequently a new Communist Party was created through the merger of the left wing of the J26M with the PSP and the left wing of the Revolutionary Directorate.

Creation of Cuban CP

The process of creating a united party took several years and did not go smoothly.

The creation of a united leadership began with occasional meetings between the leaders of the left wing of the J26M (Fidel and Raúl Castro, Che Guevara, etc.) and leaders of the PSP. These meetings later became more regular.⁸²

Initially the Revolutionary Directorate did not participate in these meetings. Later the growing collaboration was formalised and the DR joined. This culminated in the fusion of the three groups into what became known initially as the Integrated Revolutionary Organisations, then later as the United Party of the Socialist Revolution, and finally adopted the name Communist Party of Cuba in 1965.

The unification of the three organisations grew out of their collaboration in practical tasks such as building the militia, fighting the Bay of Pigs invasion, etc. Fidel Castro later commented: “When all the other organisations were deserting the revolution, the only ones that remained were the July 26 Movement, the Popular Socialist Party and the Revolutionary Directorate ...”⁸³

Escalante

However, the fusion was not without problems. Anibal Escalante, a leader of the PSP, became the Organisation Secretary of the ORI. He used his position to appoint former members of the PSP to key positions in the party, pushing aside revolutionaries from other backgrounds. He and his supporters used their control of the party apparatus to interfere in the decision-making processes of government bodies and ensure that their cronies were appointed to government positions. He tried to control the state security apparatus.

In March 1962 Fidel Castro publically denounced Escalante for “sectarianism” (i.e., favouring former PSP members at the expense of other revolutionaries); for interfering in government administration, including the appointment of leading personnel, rather than focusing on the party’s political leadership role; for making the party apparatus a “nest of privilege, of benefits, of a system of favours of all types”;⁸⁴ for suppressing free speech; and for cutting the party off from the masses.

According to Castro, Escalante’s motivation was “personal ambition”. He wanted to establish “an organisation that he controlled”.⁸⁵

Escalante was removed from his position, as was Isidoro Malmierca, the head of the police at that time. According to US socialist Joseph Hansen, “Malmierca joined with Escalante in this effort [to create a bureaucratic regime], and hundreds of illegal acts, including arbitrary arrests, were charged against him”.⁸⁶

A range of measures taken in an attempt to undo the damage caused by Escalante and avoid similar problems in the future. The policy of separating the party from day-to-day state administration was spelled out. There was a renewed emphasis on free discussion within the revolution. Castro, in a speech given on March 13, 1962, said that “the revolution must be a school of unfettered thought”.⁸⁷

A new method of selecting new party members was adopted. Meetings were held in factories and other workplaces at which workers nominated the most dedicated revolutionaries amongst their co-workers as “model workers”, and these people became the pool from which potential recruits to the party were drawn. The aims of this procedure were: to recruit the many people radicalised by the revolution, but who were not in any existing party; to recruit dedicated revolutionaries, rather than careerists, as members of the party; and to link the party more closely to the masses.

The problem of bureaucracy

Escalante represented an incipient bureaucratic layer that was starting to emerge in Cuba. The measures mentioned above were useful in combating the bureaucracy and its Stalinist politics. But they could not provide a total solution. Pressures towards the

growth of bureaucracy were inherent in the objective situation — the economic backwardness of Cuba, the capitalist world environment, Cuba's isolation as a result of the US blockade, the ongoing US military threat, and Cuba's dependence on the bureaucratized Soviet Union for assistance in breaking the blockade and for military defence.

These pressures could be counteracted to some extent by the measures that accompanied Escalante's removal, but could not be not totally eliminated without the spread of the revolution internationally (something that the Cuban revolutionary leadership, including Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and others, tried to promote, though with little success in the short term).

Stalinist politics within the new party were not totally eliminated after Escalante was removed from his position. Former PSP members who had not broken totally from Stalinist ideology remained influential. The ideological influence of the Soviet Union also favoured Stalinist tendencies in the Cuban CP.

Bureaucracy in the unions

As a result of the objective conditions which Cuba faced, pressures towards bureaucratization existed in all organisations to a greater or lesser extent. The unions were an example.

Before the revolution the Cuban union movement was controlled by corrupt and conservative bureaucrats who collaborated with the Batista dictatorship. Eusebio Mujal, the general secretary of the CTC, typified this layer.

When Batista fell, Mujal fled into exile, and the most prominent Mujalistas were removed from their union positions. They were replaced by anti-Batista activists, mainly from the J26M, with PSP members also holding some positions in some unions.

However, not all Batista-era union officials were replaced. Some less prominent officials who had supported (or at least failed to oppose) Batista when he was firmly in control, switched sides when it became apparent that his regime was about to fall, and claimed to be supporters of democracy.

Furthermore, some of the new J26M union officials began to show signs of turning into a new bureaucratic layer. Some officials belonging to the right wing of the J26M turned against the revolution as it deepened and began to enter the socialist stage.

These right-wing bureaucrats were defeated in a new struggle during 1959-61 by an alliance between the PSP and the left wing of the J26M. But the very difficult objective situation at that time, combined with the influence of Stalinism, created new pressures towards the bureaucratization of the unions. There was a deterioration in the democracy of the union movement. This began to be reversed in the 1970s, when

there was a drive to restore democracy in the unions.

Inequality & relative privilege

A complicating factor in the struggle for socialism was the existence of a high degree of inequality within the working class.

Prior to the revolution the Cuban working class was highly differentiated. Those workers who had full-time, permanent jobs in large urban enterprises were relatively well off, benefiting from progressive labor legislation introduced after the 1933 revolution against the Machado dictatorship, including a 44-hour week, workers compensation, retirement pensions (albeit often inadequate), relative job security and some degree of protection against unjustified dismissals (though politically motivated sackings did occur). But in small enterprises the progressive labor laws were often not enforced. There were also large numbers of unemployed and under-employed workers, street vendors, beggars and others living in extreme poverty. In the countryside the sugar workers, mainly employed on seasonal basis, were also very poor and insecure.

In the early months of 1959, all sections of the working class had won improvements in their standard of living. Later in the year Castro increasingly stressed the need to focus on solving the problems of low-paid and unemployed workers, while calling on the better paid workers to make sacrifices.

This led to a difference in attitude between the better-off workers on the one hand and the rural workers and other lower paid workers on the other. The latter remained strong supporters of the revolution, and of Castro's leadership. The former had a mixed attitude. Most had supported the overthrow of Batista and the initial democratic reforms such as land reform. But some were concerned about losing the relative privileges which they had within capitalist society, a fear that was encouraged by some union officials.

Struggles in the union movement

During the January 1959 insurrection, the union movement had begun to be transformed. Top union leaders who had collaborated with the Batista dictatorship were removed from their positions, and many were jailed or went into exile. However, many lower ranking collaborators remained in their positions. There was a rush by opportunists and Mujalistas to join the J26M, and this was encouraged by right-wing elements of the J26M wanting to build a counterweight to the PSP.⁸⁸

After an initial period of chaos as different groups tried to take of control of union offices, elections were held for new union leaderships. The majority of those elected

were supporters of the J26M. Others were members of the PSP, while there were also some members of the bourgeois Autentico Party and members of Catholic organisations. The J26M members were themselves very diverse. Some of them just wanted bourgeois democracy where unions could function freely. Others had some kind of socialist perspective. Some were in favour of cooperation with the PSP, while others were anti-communist.

A new provisional committee of the CTC was formed comprising nine members, none of whom were PSP members. The exclusion of the PSP was sectarian and undemocratic, given that it had been part of the united front which had organised the general strike, something that the J26M had been unable to do on its own.

David Salvador became the provisional secretary-general of the CTC. He had been part of the J26M urban underground leadership which had refused to collaborate with the PSP in the lead up to the April 1958 strike. While not overtly anti-communist in his rhetoric during 1959, he nevertheless tried to exclude PSP members from leading roles in the union movement.

Whatever their personal ideological predilections, all union officials were under pressure from the majority of workers who looked to Fidel Castro for inspiration and supported his proposals for taking the revolution forward.

Castro and other leaders of the revolution regularly addressed meetings of workers — both mass rallies held in public squares and smaller meetings of particular groups of workers such as sugar workers or oil workers. Proposals for the future were put before such gatherings for discussion and approval. This was known as “direct democracy”.

Divisions in the J26M increasingly affected the union movement. Some union officials who had appeared to be strong supporters of Castro became opponents of the revolutionary government. David Salvador was a notable example.

At the CTC congress held in November 1959, deep divisions were evident. When a few PSP members were included on a proposed slate for the new CTC executive committee, this met with strong opposition from right-wing delegates. According to Cordova, “a riot broke out”.⁸⁹

When Castro addressed the congress he appealed for unity of the working class, including the PSP. He threatened that if the CTC was controlled by right-wing forces, he would lead the left-wing minority into the factories to win the masses directly. He spoke of the need to arm the workers to defend the revolution, but warned that under a divided trade union leadership arms in the hands of workers could be used against each other.⁹⁰

Although Castro was heckled by right-wing sections of the Congress, he won over

the majority of delegates. According to Cordova, “The delegates, mostly hostile at the beginning, were finally swayed by the prime minister’s words and prepared to accept some compromise solutions”.⁹¹

The congress directed CTC secretary David Salvador to draw up a new slate. Salvador’s slate excluded members of the PSP, but it did include some pro-unity members of the J26M. This slate was adopted by the congress.

Purges

The CTC congress adopted a resolution calling for the purging of any remaining Mujalistas (those who, like Mujal, had collaborated with Batista) from the union movement. Subsequently a committee was set up by the new CTC executive to hear accusations, gather evidence and present it to assemblies of union members for a decision on what action to take. The committee was led by left-wing members of the J26M, who were extremely zealous in carrying out this task.

Murray describes the process as having “an air of a French revolutionary tribunal trying the aristocrats”.⁹² He reports that the accused officials had little support: “A reputation as an anti-communist, so long an asset in the pre-revolutionary competition for union office, now met its nemesis. Castro’s strong stand for unity with the communists, the rapid polarisation of the Cuban population ... the emerging identification of anti-communism with counter-revolution ... left the anti-communist labour leaders with little support in the mass assemblies”.⁹³

Cordova claims that this process was often abused, and that it became a vehicle for purging any union official who disagreed with the government. He describes a number of cases of undemocratic practices in carrying out the purges. For example, he claims that non-Marxist delegates were sometimes not notified of the time and place of meetings at which union officials were voted out of office.⁹⁴ However, he admits that: “On other occasions, the attendance was large and the meeting was held at the union hall and at the right time ...”⁹⁵

Cordova blames the purges on Castro’s alleged desire for absolute power. This explanation ignores the objective situation of intensifying struggle between the Cuban revolution and US imperialism. Towards the end of 1959 pressures and threats against Cuba from the United States were escalating. Terrorist actions by counter-revolutionaries were increasing, and it became clear that the US intended to wage war on the Castro government. This was the context in which the purges took place.

Divisions within the J26M had been growing between those who wanted the revolution to remain at the bourgeois-democratic stage and those who were prepared to advance to the socialist stage. Right-wing sections of the J26M were increasingly

coming out in open opposition to Castro. Sections of the J26M, including the union leadership in Camaguey province, had supported a rebellion by Rebel Army officer Hubert Matos in October 1959. The left feared that the right wing of the J26M (including some union officials) would play a role in the plans of US imperialism to overthrow the Castro government.

Castro's reference to the danger of workers fighting each other under a divided union leadership reflected his fear that pro-imperialist union leaders could mislead certain sectors of the working class into conflict with the majority of workers and peasants. This created a sense of urgency about removing potential US collaborators from positions of influence in the unions.

Cordova refers to an "... atmosphere of collective hysteria provoked by the growing counter-revolutionary action".⁹⁶ It is very likely that in some cases the legitimate fear of US-backed terrorism and of a potential US invasion led to over-reaction, including false accusations against some union officials. It is also probable that in some cases PSP members deliberately vilified political opponents.

The PSP, although shaken up by the revolution, had not broken totally with all aspects of Stalinism. Not long afterwards, in 1962, Fidel Castro publicly denounced the sectarian and bureaucratic practices of PSP leader Aníbal Escalante. It appears from Cordova's account that PSP members in the unions sometimes used similar sectarian and bureaucratic practices in carrying out the purge during the 1959-61 period.

But the main blame for the alleged "atmosphere of collective hysteria" must fall on US imperialism and its local allies, who were trying to carry out a violent counter-revolution. Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and other revolutionary leaders were very conscious of the history of US intervention to overthrow progressive governments in Latin America. Once the US had begun its campaign to overthrow the Cuban revolutionary government, Castro and his supporters were determined to remove from positions of influence anyone who might be a potential collaborator with imperialist plans. This included right wing-union officials.

Murray's analogy with the purges of aristocrats during the French revolution, while a bit exaggerated (right-wing Cuban union officials did not have their heads chopped off) has a certain validity. Like the French revolution, the Cuban revolution was under siege from hostile powers allied to internal counter-revolutionary forces. This created a climate where supporters of the revolution wanted swift action to remove counter-revolutionaries from positions of influence, including in the unions. While this was generally done in a democratic manner, through a vote of union members, this was not always the case.

In addition to the activities of the CTC's purge committee, the minister of labor

was given power to remove union officials from office. (Such government interference in unions is not without precedent in the history of the revolutionary movement. During the Russian civil war, for example, everything was subordinated to the needs of war — including union rights. Trotsky, the leader of the Red Army, put railway workers under martial law. According to Trotsky's biographer Isaac Deutscher, "When the railwaymen's trade union raised objections to his action, he dismissed its leaders and appointed others willing to do his bidding."⁹⁷)

Cordova notes that there was little resistance to the purges. He explains this as follows: "Castro had undermined the position of trade union leaders by appealing directly to the masses ... Castro's following was indeed so strong among the rank and file, who remembered his promises and the social and economic benefits of the first months of the revolution, that no labor leader could have hoped to challenge him. Further, many workers were now so thoroughly imbued with revolutionary doctrines that they were prepared to go all the way with him."⁹⁸

There were a few cases where right-wing union officials had the support of a significant section of the rank and file, and were able to put up some resistance to attempts to remove them from their positions. One example was the Electrical Workers Federation, whose leader Amaury Fraginals managed to resist for some time the attempts of the left to remove him from office. He retained the support of a significant section of the workers by claiming to defend their economic interests. However the rise of right-wing terrorism, and allegations that Fraginals was involved, eventually led to his removal.

On November 29, 1960, saboteurs blew up five power terminals, blacking out several districts of Havana. The CTC called a meeting of electrical workers on December 9 to discuss the sabotage. Fraginals boycotted the meeting and called a demonstration of his supporters, who marched through the streets shouting "Cuba si, Rusia no" (Cuba yes, Russia no). According to Cordova the demonstration attracted 1000 people.

But electrical workers were by no means united behind Fraginals. 600 members of the union signed a statement accusing the union leadership of supporting the sabotage.⁹⁹ On December 14 another meeting of electrical workers convened by the CTC voted to depose the union executive.

Many of Fraginals' supporters were subsequently arrested or dismissed from their jobs. Fraginals himself fled into exile.

Why did a section of the electrical workers oppose the government? Castro, addressing the December 14 electrical workers meeting, said that opposition to the government occurred mainly amongst relatively privileged sections of the working class, such as electrical workers, rather than amongst the poorest workers. He said

that the former union leadership had fostered a tendency for electrical workers to defend their special privileges rather than thinking of the interests of the working class as a whole.

While admitting an element of truth in Castro's analysis, Cordova argues that undemocratic practices by the government and its supporters also alienated a section of the workers. This seems to be true, but Cordova does not put it in the context of intensifying US aggression, which created a sense of urgency about getting rid of pro-US union officials.

The absence of a mass revolutionary socialist party with a strong base in the working class made it more difficult to carry out the transformation of the trade union movement in a fully democratic manner. On the one hand the J26M was deeply divided. On the other hand the PSP had not totally broken with its Stalinist legacy, even though considerable rethinking had occurred as a result of Castro's success in leading the revolution in the face of initial opposition from the PSP. The process of creating a new communist party was still at a very early stage.

Since the PSP was a well-organised party with a significant base in the working class, the revolutionary Marxist leadership around Castro had to rely on it to some extent in combating pro-capitalist union officials. The PSP's Stalinist ideology seems to have predisposed it to use bureaucratic methods against those it considered (rightly or wrongly) as opponents of the revolution.

Union democracy

Cuba in the early 1960s was a society under siege. In this situation there was an emphasis on unity in the face of the aggressor. This included presenting a public facade of unanimity, which tended to inhibit dissent. Unanimous votes and uncontested elections became the norm in the union movement. In 1961, for example, the CTC newspaper urged the nomination of a single slate in every union election as a show of solidarity. In 98% of cases, single slates were unanimously elected. Votes at union congresses were reported as being unanimous.¹⁰⁰

This emphasis on unanimity occurred in a context where the threat to the revolution was acute. The Bay of Pigs invasion had occurred in April 1961. A new invasion — this time carried out by the US army itself, rather than by US-backed Cuban exiles — was considered very likely in the near future.

Beginning in the early 1970s there was a renewed emphasis on union democracy. Contested elections became the norm, with voting by secret ballot, and workers could recall their representatives.¹⁰¹

The democratisation of the unions went hand in hand with the creation of the

Peoples Power system of government, in which elections are held for local, regional and national representative bodies. Unions play a major role in nominating candidates for the organs of Peoples Power.

The role of unions in a workers state

The democratisation of the unions was accompanied by a change in the nature of their activity within the workplace. The role of unions in defending workers rights against abuses by management was again emphasised, after a period in which the almost exclusive focus had been on promoting production and national defence.

As the revolution had deepened following the January 1959 insurrection, the unions had taken on new tasks such as adult education and recruiting workers to the militia. They also organised workers to carry out voluntary work in addition to their usual work. The promotion of production became a major part of the role of unions.

Fidel Castro argued that, since the capitalists had been expropriated and the means of production were now owned by the workers state, the workers had an interest in developing the means of production and defending them from imperialist attack. Blas Roca, a former leader of the PSP who became a leader of the united party, said in 1962 that “today the fundamental task of unions is to fight for an increase in production”.¹⁰²

During 1961, union congresses agreed to some cuts in workers’ benefits, such as the automatic payment of nine days sick leave at the end of the year if it had not been used, and Christmas bonuses.¹⁰³ The CTC agreed to a 48-hour week, except in industries with dangerous or unhealthy conditions.¹⁰⁴

These measures were adopted in a context where Cuba was under siege. It was subject to the US economic blockade and terrorist attacks. It had defeated the Bay of Pigs invasion but was expecting a much bigger invasion attempt.

In this context most workers seem to have accepted the necessity of sacrifice. Many participated enthusiastically in voluntary work.

But as time went on, discontent grew. This was reflected in growing levels of absenteeism and a continued high level of emigration from Cuba. Initially the emigrants were mainly from the middle and upper classes, but later increasing numbers of workers joined the exodus.

There was also growing dissatisfaction amongst workers with the unions, which were not adequately defending workers interests.

While it was necessary for unions in a socialist state such as Cuba to play a role in promoting production and defending the country, these tasks had become virtually the sole functions of Cuban unions in the 1960s. The role of unions in defending workers against management was neglected.

This one-sided approach began to be corrected in the 1970s. Linda Fuller, a US author who conducted interviews with Cuban workers in the early 1980s, comments that: “During the 1960s, Cuban unions were little concerned with defending workers’ rights. They focused almost exclusively on increasing production ... At the beginning of the 1970s, however, this began to change. While increasing production remained a primary union function ... workers’ organisations began to assume the additional task of protecting workers from abuses suffered in the process of fulfilling their productive obligations”.¹⁰⁵

The unions’ roles include opposing the victimisation of workers by management; preparing occupational health and safety plans; and carrying out occupational health and safety inspections and investigations.¹⁰⁶

In 1977 a law was passed allowing union health and safety technicians to shut down a worksite if it was considered unsafe. “In 1980 all Cuban unions launched a massive campaign to uncover infractions of labor legislation ... Among the abuses uncovered were wage and salary violations; job evaluation, promotion and hiring irregularities; infringements of social security, maternity and vacation laws; illegal or incorrect application of disciplinary measures.”¹⁰⁷

Fuller’s interviews with Cuban workers indicated that most (though not all) workers were reasonably confident that their union would defend them against management abuses.

The 44-hour week was restored. Whereas before the revolution this condition applied only to the better-off sections of the working class, today it is a standard for all workers.¹⁰⁸ The same applies to paid vacations of a month per year.¹⁰⁹

Workers participation in enterprise decision making

Cuban workers meet regularly (normally monthly) in production and service assemblies during working hours. At these meetings they discuss workplace problems. There is an opportunity for them to criticise management.

Beginning in the early 1970s, workers began to be able to participate in setting the production targets for their enterprise, which had previously been set unilaterally by JUCEPLAN, the central planning authority.

JUCEPLAN continues to produce target figures. However, these can be challenged by the workers if they are thought to be unrealistic.

Marta Harnecker, author of *Cuba: Dictatorship or Democracy?*, reports a conversation with a factory manager about this process: “The first thing we have is a basic proposal’, the manager explains to us referring to the discussion of technical-economic plans. ‘This proposal is then taken to the industry level; from the industry it

goes to the appropriate ministry, in our case the Ministry for Light industry, and thence it goes to JUCEPLAN. This organisation then works out the so-called target figures. These are then passed down the line again to be discussed anew by the workers, who ultimately settle on the figures they believe themselves capable of producing, taking into account conditions existing at the factory.”¹¹⁰

Linda Fuller refers to this as a “process of bargaining and compromise ... Workers told me that when supra-worksites planning officials steadfastly supported a figure to which the producers had objected, they were obliged to defend their stand before the workers in detail. They were also expected to explain how their figure could be met and to supply any technical aid needed by the worksite to reach the disputed goal.”¹¹¹

Peoples Power: origins

In the early years of the revolution, Cuba did not have a process for electing representatives to a national parliament.

The revolutionary government had been brought to power by a series of mass mobilisations of the workers and peasants. The masses participated in politics through a range of organisations — the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, the unions, the peasant association, the Cuban Womens Federation, etc.

Marta Harnecker argues that the state was democratic, even without elections: “But if the Cuban state has acted like a dictatorship toward the counter-revolution, it has been — even without the presence of representative institutions — an essentially democratic state. Over all these years, it had represented and defended the interests of the workers and of the Cuban people, avoiding the adoption of any important revolutionary measure without first consulting the vast majority of the people through a variety of mechanisms.”¹¹²

Similarly, Raúl Castro argued:

For the sake of the people, the revolutionary state rescued the riches of the nation from the claws of imperialism and exploiters.

It has converted the private property of a few (owners of the means of production) into the property of all.

It wiped out widespread unemployment and opened possibilities of work for all; it eliminated illiteracy and made education free, hence within the reach of all; it made access to health care easily obtainable and free, a right of all, with old age no longer the cause of anxious concern.

The revolutionary state organised the people, gave them weapons, and taught them how to use them in their own defence. The masses have participated in the discussions of all important matters affecting the revolution, especially of its major

laws, and now [our people] begin to participate in the discussion of economic plans up to the level of production and service units.¹¹³

Before 1959, Fidel Castro had promised that elections would be held soon after the overthrow of Batista. On February 28, 1959, he said that elections would be held “within two years”.¹¹⁴

However, he decided to postpone elections. According to Morray: “Castro, in 1959, came to define the issue over elections as one of timing. He said on April 9 that elections would be held when the Agrarian Reform had been completed, when everyone had a job, when all could read and write, when all children had free schools, and all had access to hospitals. These deficiencies still to be corrected made fair elections impossible, since it was part of the political tradition of the country to take advantage of the illiterate, to purchase the votes of the unemployed with money, and to keep scholarships and admission to hospitals under the control of the politicians. ‘It is necessary’, he said, ‘to put an end to poverty, to consolidate the work of the revolution, before holding elections.’”¹¹⁵

Probably Castro’s decision to postpone elections was influenced by the divisions in the J26M. If elections had been held in early 1959, right-wing candidates running in the name of the J26M might have won many seats in congress, since the masses were not yet clear about the significance of these divisions. Together with other right-wing elements masquerading as “revolutionaries”, they would have tried to use congress to block the advance of the revolution.

In practice the idea of elections was put on hold indefinitely. It came back onto the agenda in the early 1970s, when Castro realised that he and the government he led had made a serious error.

Castro had led a campaign to reach a target of producing ten million tons of sugar in 1970. This target was not reached. Worse still, the single-minded focus on this goal had led to the neglect of other sectors of the economy.

The ten million ton target had been an example of voluntarist thinking — the setting of unrealistic goals without taking account of objective reality. It was similar to Mao’s so-called Great Leap Forward in China (though nowhere near as disastrous in its effects).

But Castro’s reaction to the failure of his plan was very different from Mao’s. Whereas Mao maintained the cult of an infallible leader, Castro spoke to the people assembled in Revolution Square and admitted his mistake. “And, in truth, the heroic effort to increase [sugar] production ... caused a dislocation of the economy, a reduction in production in other sectors and, in general, an increase in our difficulties.”¹¹⁶

Furthermore, Castro realised the need for formal democratic structures to hold

his government accountable and to minimise the likelihood of similar errors in the future. The result was the creation of the system known as Peoples Power. This is a system for the election of government bodies, although it is very different from the bourgeois parliamentary system.

Peoples Power: how it works

Cuba has elections to assemblies at the local, provincial and national level. Representatives can be recalled by those who elected them, and receive no monetary privileges. Most representatives at all levels continue to work in their usual jobs for their usual pay, with time off for their duties as representatives.

There are candidacy commissions which play a role in selecting candidates for the provincial and national assemblies. But these commissions do not have the final say on who will be elected.

Until the early 1990s elections to provincial and national assemblies were indirect — i.e. the members of these bodies were elected by the members of the municipal assemblies, who had themselves been elected by the voters of their municipality. In 1992 the law was changed to require that the candidates put forward by the municipal assembly as proposed members of higher assemblies must be put to the voters of the municipality for approval.

This process is often criticised because the choice before the voters is limited: they can either accept or reject the candidates put before them by the municipal assembly. But this is only the final stage of a long process, which begins with potential candidates being nominated by meetings in workplaces, mass organisations and neighbourhoods. These nominations are collated by the relevant candidacy commission, comprising members appointed by mass organisations such as the union movement, the peasants association and the womens federation. The candidacy commission comes up with a recommended list of candidates which it puts to the municipal assembly. The municipal assembly makes the decision on which candidates to put to the voters for approval as members of higher assemblies.

The National Assembly is the highest decision-making body in Cuba. It elects from its own ranks the State Council, to which it delegates some of its powers between sessions of the National Assembly.

Limits on democracy

The Cuban political system has both strengths and weaknesses. The nomination process outlined above gives workers and peasants a form of participation that does not exist under bourgeois democracy. But the absence of opposition parties in Cuba

means that the elections are not a focus for debate on the overall direction of the country. Instead the discussion focuses on the personal qualities of individual candidates.

Under present conditions any significant opposition party would almost certainly be a pro-capitalist party. Such a party would be heavily funded by US imperialism.

The threat of a US invasion of Cuba is very real. (There can be no reasonable doubt about this after the invasion of Iraq.) The main deterrent to an invasion is the prospect that the invaders would face a strong and united resistance from the whole Cuban population. If the Cuban government were to allow well-funded capitalist opposition parties and media to exist, they would try to undermine this unity. To the extent that they succeeded, this would increase the likelihood of an invasion. Whether to take this risk is a decision for the Cuban government, not for Australian socialists.

In a revolutionary society under siege there is a strong impulse towards unity amongst those who defend the revolution. It is this, rather than repression, which explains the absence of left-wing parties outside the Cuban Communist Party.

The desire to present a united public face to the world has tended to limit the scope of political and ideological discussion in the Cuban mass media. This has meant that some important issues were not thoroughly discussed and fully understood by the mass of the people. (For example, the bureaucratic degeneration of the former Soviet Union was never discussed in the Cuban mass media while the Soviet Union still existed. As a result most Cubans had little or no understanding of the nature of the Soviet regime).

The absence of opposition parties does not mean the absence of discussion. New laws under consideration by the national assembly are discussed in workplaces and mass organisations, often resulting in revisions to the proposals.

Trotskyism in Cuba

The limitations on democracy in Cuba are mainly due to the government's need to defend itself against imperialist pressures and threats. This does not exclude the possibility that the government can make mistakes in how it deals with dissent. The suppression of the Cuban Trotskyist group, the Revolutionary Workers Party (Trotskyist) or POR(T), in the early 1960s would seem to be an example of this.

The PSP, due to its Stalinist tradition, was very hostile to Trotskyism, and was looking for an excuse to repress the POR(T). Unfortunately, the POR(T) made it easy for them. They were followers of Juan Posadas, an Argentinian who had been the leader of the Fourth International's Latin American Bureau, but who split from the FI in 1962. He developed some bizarre views, including the idea that a nuclear war would

prepare the way for a worldwide socialist revolution, an idea which he expressed at the time of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when the threat of nuclear war was very real. This made it easy for the Cuban Stalinists to attack Trotskyism.

The POR(T) took a sectarian attitude towards the Castro leadership, which they claimed was holding back the revolution. Not satisfied with Castro's demand that the US withdraw from Guantánamo, they talked of "expelling" the US (which, if the word "expel" was taken seriously, would have meant that the Cuban army should militarily attack the base). They issued leaflets calling for a march on the base. In a situation where the US was looking for an excuse to invade Cuba, any clashes at the boundary of the base could have been used as a pretext for US military action against Cuba.¹¹⁶

It was correct for the Cuban government to prevent actions that could endanger the revolution, such as the proposed march on Guantánamo Bay. But the Stalinists used the ultraleftism of the POR(T) as a pretext to attack Trotskyism in general, and to suppress the circulation of Trotsky's ideas in Cuba. For example, the POR(T) had been planning to publish Trotsky's book *The Permanent Revolution*, but when the POR(T)'s newspaper was suppressed, the plates for the book were smashed.

The suppression of Trotsky's ideas in Cuba was very unfortunate, since he had a lot to say which was relevant to the Cuban revolution — particularly on the problem of bureaucracy. But the bad reputation of the Cuban Trotskyists meant that most Cuban revolutionary activists did not see Trotsky's ideas as worth defending.

This is beginning to change. In recent years there has been increasing discussion of Trotsky's ideas in Cuba.

Gay rights

At the time of the revolution, prejudice against gays was widespread in Cuba. According to Fidel Castro, "the Revolution never encouraged those prejudices".¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, many Cubans who had participated in the struggle against Batista shared some of the homophobic attitudes of the broader society, and the revolutionary government made some concessions to these attitudes. This led to some mistakes in the treatment of gays.

In the 1960s, fearing a large scale US invasion, the Cuban government introduced military conscription for young men. However, some young men, who were considered to be unreliable and/or unsuited to life in the army, were assigned to civilian work, but under military discipline. They were put in "military units to assist production" (UMAP).

Due to the prejudices that existed in the leadership of the Cuban armed forces at that time, gays were included amongst those considered unsuitable for military service and sent to UMAP. They were often mistreated by those in charge of these units.

The UMAP system existed for three years before being abolished.¹¹⁹

The situation for gays has improved markedly since then. Today the government supports efforts to counter homophobic prejudice. An example is the Cuban pro-gay rights film *Strawberry and Chocolate*.

According to Fidel Castro: “Homosexuals were most certainly the victims of discrimination ... Today a much more civilised, more educated population is gradually overcoming those prejudices”.¹²⁰

International solidarity

Ever since 1959, Cuba’s revolutionary leadership has tried to spread the revolution internationally. The methods used have varied.

In the early years there was a one-sided emphasis on guerrilla warfare as the main way in which the revolution would spread in Latin America and elsewhere in the third world. Che Guevara gave his life trying to make a revolution in Bolivia.

In 1975 Cuba sent troops to help Angola, a newly independent former Portuguese colony, to defeat a US-backed South African invasion. Cuban troops remained in Angola for 13 years, and inflicted a major defeat on South African troops at the battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1988. This defeat had a major impact on politics throughout Southern Africa. South Africa was forced to withdraw from its colony of Namibia, and the defeat of the South African army gave a boost to the confidence of South Africa’s black majority, hastening the fall of apartheid.

Today Cuba’s international solidarity work takes a predominantly non-military form. Cuba has sent tens of thousands of doctors to treat sick people in other third world countries, and has trained thousands of doctors from these countries so that they can build up their own health care systems. For example Cuba (unlike Australia) has hundreds of doctors in East Timor, and is training hundreds of East Timorese to become doctors and other health workers.

After Hurricane Katrina, Cuba offered to send doctors to help the people of New Orleans — an offer that was rejected by the US government, despite its own inability or unwillingness to organise an adequate response to the health problems of the people. The Bush administration feared that Cuban doctors would be an advertisement for Cuba’s socialist health care system, and would inspire US citizens to demand free, high quality health care too.

Economic crisis

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the restoration of capitalism in its successor states (as well as in the other countries of Eastern Europe), caused a severe

economic crisis in Cuba in the early 1990s.

Ever since the imposition of the US economic blockade, the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had been Cuba's main trading partners. The loss of these partners meant a severe disruption of production due to the loss of access to raw materials, spare parts for machines, etc. It also meant the loss of a guaranteed market for Cuba's products, particularly sugar, at stable prices which were often more favourable to Cuba than the wildly fluctuating prices in the capitalist world market.

The result was a dramatic decline in Cuba's gross domestic product, and a severe decline in living standards.

Worse still, some Cubans were hit harder than others. For example, those Cubans with relatives living in the United States who sent them dollars fared much better than those who didn't have this advantage. The result was growing inequality in Cuba.

The government had to make increased concessions to capitalism in some areas. Foreign investment in Cuba by capitalist companies increased, and there was some increase in the freedom of Cubans to engage in small scale private enterprise.

Taken together, these phenomena meant the growth of the objective pressures towards capitalist restoration in Cuba. Many people predicted that the Cuban government would either collapse or adopt a policy of capitalist restoration.

However, this did not happen. The Cuban government was different from the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It did not represent the interests of a privileged bureaucracy. There was still popular support for the Castro government and for socialism, as shown by the huge mass rallies against imperialist threats to Cuba and in support of the socialist government.

While the government was forced to make concessions to capitalism, it tried to limit their scope. It was forced to introduce austerity measures, but tried to maintain the key gains of the socialist revolution in health, education, social security, etc. The proposed austerity measures were discussed by workers in workplaces, and some aspects were modified based on workers' feedback.

The Communist Party launched a "battle of ideas", aiming to combat illusions in capitalism and imperialism, and to promote socialist values.

The government tried to find alternative solutions to meet people's needs — e.g., replacing the use of oil in agriculture by organic farming, and promoting the use of bicycles for transport.

The government continued to follow an internationalist foreign policy, which included helping other third world countries in areas of Cuban expertise, such as health and education. When the Venezuelan revolution began, Cuba sent thousands of doctors to work among Venezuela's poor, and provided training to thousands of

Venezuelans to become doctors.

Today

There has been a gradual economic recovery in Cuba since the mid-nineties. More recently, the socialist government of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, while benefiting from Cuban aid in health care and other areas, has also assisted Cuba with cheap oil and technical expertise in certain industries. The Venezuelan revolution has also had an impact on the psychology of Cuba's people, giving them more confidence in the future of socialism.

Conclusion

For nearly 50 years Cuba has been attempting to carry out a transition to socialism in a world dominated by capitalism. It is a poor and militarily weak country with a rich and powerful neighbour (the United States) that has attempted to overthrow the Cuban government using a variety of tactics, including an invasion attempt (at the Bay of Pigs in 1961), numerous terrorist attacks, chemical and biological warfare, economic blockade, and the funding of "dissidents" within Cuba. Given this objective situation, it is not surprising that Cuba falls short of being an ideal model of a socialist society.

Nevertheless, Cuba has achieved a lot. It has made big gains for its own people in areas such as health and education. It has also shown a tremendous internationalist spirit in helping the people of other nations.

The revolutionary government has made mistakes, but it has also shown an ability to correct its errors. The failure of the 10 million ton sugar harvest led to the creation of Peoples Power. The discrimination against gays in the 1960s has been replaced by a policy of combating homophobia.

The over-emphasis on guerrilla war as a strategy for spreading the revolution to other countries has been corrected, and Cuba gives solidarity to movements carrying on a variety of forms of mass struggle.

Cuba is a society in transition between capitalism and socialism. It can not complete this transition if it remains isolated in a capitalist world. It can only become socialist as part of worldwide transition to socialism. In the mean time it needs our solidarity.

Notes

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- 22 *ibid.*, pp. 124-126.
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- 30 Hart, pp. 142-143.
- 31 *ibid.*, pp. 226-229.
- 32 *ibid.*, p. 160.
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- 34 Hart, p. 189.
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- 41 *ibid.*, pp. 208-209.
- 42 Hart, pp. 240-241.
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- 101 The revitalisation of the Cuban unions is detailed in the book *Work and Democracy in Socialist Cuba* by Linda Fuller (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1992).
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Some groups on the left claim that the Cuban Revolution was made by a few hundred guerrilla fighters, and that the masses played no role. In reality, however, the overthrow of the regime was not simply a matter of the Rebel Army marching into the cities.

Chris Slee sketches Cuba's revolutionary history and shows how the workers, peasants and students played an active role, before, during and after the insurrection which destroyed the Batista dictatorship. Fidel Castro called a general strike which developed into a mass popular uprising during the first few days of January 1959. The subsequent transformation of property relations was the result of ongoing mass struggles by the workers and peasants.

Resistance books