

Organised Labour and the Cuban Revolution, 1952-1959

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I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

S. Cushion, 14th September 2012

Abstract

The standard historiography sees the working class as a passive bystander in the insurrectionary phase of the Cuban revolution, assuming that the real struggle was conducted by a rural guerrilla army. However, an examination of the archival evidence contradicts this view and shows that workers played a much more active role in the defeat of the Batista regime than they are normally given credit for.

At the start of the 1950s, Cuba was suffering a crisis in profitability as the world price of sugar declined. This led the employers to conduct a productivity drive backed by the full repressive force of the Cuban state. Going on strike in a dictatorship is a life or death decision and workers need to feel some confidence in their chances of survival and in the possibility of successfully gaining a result that would be in their political and economic interests. Thus, following the defeat of a wave of militantly organised strikes in 1955, significant numbers of working class militants felt of the need for armed support to enable them defend their wages and conditions. Starting from the city of Guantánamo and spreading to cover most of the island, these activists constructed an impressive, clandestine, working class organisation in alliance with the rebel army which, after several failed attempts, proved capable of calling a successful general strike in January 1959. This strike was crucial to the rebel victory.

This thesis, based on primary source material found in archives and private collections in Havana, Manzanillo, Guantánamo and Santiago de Cuba, will re-examine working class participation in the Cuban insurrection of the 1950s, concentrating on organised labour rather than the role of individual citizens.

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Figure 1: Map of Cuba showing the principal sites of labour militancy during the 1950s

Preface

Several years ago, when I took the decision to embark on an MA in Areas Studies in Latin America at the Institute for the Study of the Americas, a friend gave me a copy of Burt Glynn's collection of photographs of Havana in January 1959.¹ These stunning images, taken during those first few days after the fall of Batista, show a mass popular uprising, quite at odds with the popular understanding of the Cuban revolution as the work of a small rebel army engaged in guerrilla warfare up in the mountains. The images aroused my curiosity, and I decided that my dissertation would question the level of mass involvement in the rebel victory over the Batista regime. My initial research for the MA dissertation, undertaken in the archives of the *Instituto de Historia de Cuba* (IHC) in Havana during the summer of 2007, unearthed an untold story of working class struggle. As an active trade unionist, I found this highly intriguing and resolved to continue my researches.

Over the years, the IHC has painstakingly amassed a collection of leaflets, pamphlets, clandestine newspapers and similar agitational material from the 1950s, most of which were produced by typing directly onto thin paper stencils for duplication by a mimeograph machine such as a Gestetner or Roneo. They evoked images of small groups of militant workers, perhaps aided by revolutionary students, meeting in the home of one of their number, secretly producing a few hundred copies of a leaflet to be passed from hand to hand at work, scattered from the windows of passing cars or left on the seats of public transport. The written content evidenced a lively working class political milieu, where the way forward was hotly debated between different tendencies, where strikes and demonstrations were commonplace, and where ordinary workers played an active part in shaping their own destiny. The number of leaflets to have survived is in itself astonishing, given that such material could be a death sentence if discovered during a police raid or at an army checkpoint. Yet no one has made a systematic examination of this remarkable collection.

The centre of such action, however, was in all likelihood not Havana, but rather Oriente province, which was distant from the seat of power and the heartland of the guerrilla struggle. I chose, therefore, to explore in particular detail the provincial archives in Manzanillo, Guantánamo and Santiago de Cuba. These largely untapped reservoirs of locally produced material testified to a revolutionary process far from the

¹ Glinn, *Havana: the revolutionary moment* (2001)

capital in which party political lines often counted for less than workplace and neighbourhood solidarity. The written documents from these and other holdings form the bedrock of this thesis, yet they required contextualising, and this came from interviewing surviving veterans in different parts of the country. It was an honour to speak to these remarkable men and women; I hope I have done justice to their story.

I would like to thank my supervisors Kate Quinn and Jean Stubbs for their help, support, encouragement and constructive engagement. I am also extremely grateful to Angelina Rojas and Jorge Ibarra Guitart of the *Instituto de Historia de Cuba*, my mentors in Cuba and the source of much encouragement and advice. I would like to acknowledge the generous help of Alcibíades Poveda Díaz, Alejandra Lopez, Alejandra Serpente, Alex Ostmann, Alfredo Menéndez, Barry Carr, Beatriz Rajland, Belkis Quesada, Bill Booth, Brian Pollitt, Camillia Cowling, Carrie Gibson, Clem Seecharan, Colin Lewis, Daniel Kersffeld, Delio Orozco and the staff of the Manzanillo Archives, Fernando Carcases and the staff of the Library of the University of Oriente, Dylan Vernon, Emily Morris, Felipe Pérez, Francis Velázquez Fuentes, Francisco Monserrat Iser, Gary Tennant, Hal Klepak, Ian Burchall, Inés Enoa Castillo, James Dunkerley, Jana Lipman, Jerry Hagelberg, Jon Curry-Machado, Jorge Giovanetti, Jorge Ibarra Cuesta, José Puello Socarrás, José Sanchez Guerra and the staff of the Guantánamo provincial archive, Juan Carlos Gomez, Juan Venegas, Liz Dore, Ken Fuller, Kevin Middlebrook, Kristine Hatzky, Leonie Jordan, Luis Figures, Luis Suarez, Maku Veloz, Mandy Banton, Margarita Canseco, María Celia Cotarelo, María Victoria Antúnez Salto, Maritza Mendez and the staff of the IHC archives, Mary Turner, Maxine Molyneux, Mildred de la Torre Molina, Natividad Alfaro, Nicolás Iñigo Carrera, Olivia Saunders, Oscar Zanetti, Paulo Drinot, Pedro Machado, Philip Mansfield, Rafael Duharte and the staff of the *Oficina del Historiador de Santiago de Cuba*, Reinaldo Suárez, Robert Whitney, Robin Blackburn, Servando Valdés Sánchez, Silvia Blanca-Nogales, Shirley Pemberton, Sue Thomas, Tony Kaptcia, Vicente Perez and Victor Bulmer-Thomas.

Without their help, this study would not have materialized. The responsibility for amassing and interpreting the material, however, lies with me.

I would like to dedicate this work to Mary Turner (1931-2013), historian, teacher, comrade and loyal friend.

Introduction: Researching Labour in the Cuban Revolution

The 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution, in 2009, was marked by the appearance of two films: "*Che*" and "*Ciudad en Rojo*".² The first, described as "*A grand Hollywood war movie*", depicts the revolution as the work of a band of heroic guerrillas with little or no reference to the ordinary people of the island.³ The second, a Cuban production, shows a day in the life of Santiago de Cuba during the final days of the Batista dictatorship. It portrays the brutal state terror, the organisation of the underground resistance and its relationship with the rebel army, as well as the political disagreements and class tensions within the revolutionary movement. These two films represent divergent views of the Cuban insurrection: that of the heroic guerrilla struggle, which is the one most widely held, and that of the middle class urban underground resistance, which has more recently come to the fore. However, archival research has revealed an additional dimension to the struggle that has been almost universally ignored, the participation of militant organised labour.

The research objective is to examine the activities of the organised working class in the period leading to the victory of the Cuban revolutionary forces in 1959. An analysis of these activities in the Cuban case can add to the wider academic debate about the relationship between working class mass action and the armed struggle in the context of opposition to an authoritarian regime. The political economy of Cuba in the 1950s will be examined to determine the extent to which economic considerations affected the course of the revolution. The thesis will analyse why some groups of workers supported the rebels from an early stage, while others stayed loyal to their official leaders or to the communist party. The role of the communist party has been shrouded in ideological mist arising from the Cold War. An examination of the communist party's public statements and details from primary sources about the manner in which party members applied these policies will paint a more nuanced picture than is usually given.

It is not the intention of this thesis to deny the importance of the guerrillas or the middle class underground in the fight to overthrow Batista, but rather to argue that neither view presents a complete picture, that there was a third arm to the rebel forces, a

² Soderbergh *Che* (2008)
Chavez, *Ciudad en Rojo* (2009)

³ *Empire* (2008) [quoted on the DVD case]

revolutionary labour movement. The findings of my research clearly suggest there has been a silencing of this third dimension, intentional or otherwise. One obvious reason for this is that the story of a few heroic guerrillas overcoming seemingly impossible odds makes for a romantic story, while the recounting of dogged labour activity does not have the same appeal. In the early days of revolutionary Cuba, this romance was a weapon in the hands of the more radical elements in the leadership in their battles with those, often associated with the urban underground, who wished to slow the pace of change. From the other end of the political spectrum, the idea that the Cuban revolution was the work of a few individuals without mass support also suited its enemies in the United States, and this helps explain their apparent belief that the death of Fidel Castro was all that was required to reverse the changes.

This thesis challenges the notion that the revolution emerged from a rural guerrilla struggle in which the organised working class played no role and that those workers who did participate did so as individual citizens rather than as part of an organised labour movement. My findings document substantial labour organising, which played a pivotal role in key places and times in the 1950s, especially outside Havana and markedly in eastern Cuba. It is my intention to give organised labour its due credit for the role it played in the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship. My research objectives will be addressed through the following questions.

What was the role of organised labour in the Cuban Revolution, 1952-59? There has been little previous work done on labour and working class politics during those years, which made primary empirical research vital to any assessment. This, I would argue, is much overdue. My examination of the archival material, whilst not exhaustive, points to a high level of working class political activity during the 1950s. This in turn begs further questions which this thesis attempts to address:

What were the problems facing Cuban workers during the 1950s? What were the economic issues and political issues which might be construed as fuelling class struggle?

How were Cuban workers organised beyond the formal structures of the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC)?

What was the relationship of political forces shaping the nature of labour participation in the revolution, in particular the communist *Partido Socialista Popular*

(PSP) and the July 26th Movement (M-26-7) led by Fidel Castro?

How significant was the involvement of organised labour in determining the outcome of the conflict?

To what extent were regional differences important?

How can the Cuban Revolution be characterised?

In disciplinary terms, a study of the role of organised labour in the Cuban insurrection sits between labour history and the history of revolutions. Therefore, some of the normal concerns of labour historians such as class formation, formal industrial relations procedures and patterns of everyday life are not particularly relevant in the crisis-ridden period under investigation. The struggles undertaken by working class people, their strikes and demonstrations will therefore be given greater prominence than a history of more peaceful or stable times. Likewise, in a revolutionary situation, the study of the formal organisations of the labour movement, such as trade unions, is frequently less important than the clandestine networks which were actually responsible for organising the struggles of the period. By focusing on the period from 1952 to 1959, the emphasis is on the insurrection rather than the outcome of the Cuban Revolution and thus the eventual effect on the structure of the state, the economy and society. Nevertheless, understanding the social forces involved in the insurrection phase of a revolution is essential to an understanding of the subsequent changes in the structure of society. It is a question of examining the level of participation of workers in the events of the time, acting collectively rather than as individual citizens, while analysing how workers' class interests fitted in to the wider class structure, national politics and the economy. In a period of dictatorship, the repressive role of the state becomes paramount and it is this aspect which will be mainly considered, along with an analysis of the sectional interests it represented.

In order to determine how this approach relates to current analyses, the next sections will engage with the existing scholarship that deals with both labour and revolutions in the Americas. To situate the study in its time, these sections will be linked by a review of the literature on the Cold War. Finally, I would like to draw attention to two, in my opinion excellent, recent narrative histories of working class self-activity in revolutionary situations: John Lear on the workers of Mexico City during the Revolution and Chris Earlam's work on the Barcelona anarchists during the 1920s and

1930s.⁴ I aspire to follow their example in an attempt to rescue Cuban organised labour from the condescension of history.

Labour and the political economy of Cuba

The fragmentation of the working class, along with the high levels of unemployment and underemployment which destabilised the relationship between individuals and the means of production, has led some authors to question the validity of the term "working class" in a Latin American context.⁵ This leads to a tendency for some writers, following Guillermo O'Donnell, to lump together, under the catch-all title *clases populares*, "urban and rural wage labourers, peasants, lower middle-class students, government employees and those involved in petty-commerce".⁶ This approach is problematic as it fails to identify those sections of the working population who have sufficient economic power to affect the course of events. Put simply, dock workers can exert considerable economic pressure, while informal street traders cannot. Establishing what is meant by "working class" is therefore necessary before we can investigate its history.

Under the title of *Labour Again Debates*, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam organised an on-line discussion on this topic.⁷ Marcel van de Linden argues that "there is an almost endless variety of producers in capitalism", which leads him to lump them all together again as a general class of "subaltern workers in a state of 'instituted heteronomy'" and to reinstate what he refers to as "the pre-Marxian concept of the 'labouring classes'".⁸ Enrique de la Garza replies by reminding us of the importance of looking at the essentials of the relationships of production, rather than minor differences of form. He argues that economic power and resulting political significance is not based on absolute numbers.⁹

The numerical strength of the agricultural workforce in Latin America and the relatively small numbers of workers who make up the urban industrial proletariat has

⁴ Lear, *Workers, Neighbours and Citizens* (2001)

Earlham, *Anarchism and the City* (2010)

⁵ Whitney, *History or Teleology?* (2001) p.231

⁶ O'Donnell, *Tensions in the Bureaucratic-Authoritarian State and the Question of Democracy* (1979) p.70

Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba* (2001) p.4

Pérez Stable, *The Cuban Revolution* (1999) pp.7 & 213

⁷ <http://www.iisg.nl/labouragain/>

⁸ Linden, *Globalising the Working-Class Concept* (2003) pp.4,12

⁹ Garza, *Comentarios al artículo del Profesor Marcel Van der Linden* (2003) p.2

led some authors to define this latter group as an "aristocracy of labour", who used their economic power to further their own narrow sectional interests to the detriment of wider political involvement and generalised class solidarity.¹⁰ Charles Berquist describes how this assessment, led to a "*consensus over the relative unimportance and conservative nature of organized labour*", a position he opposes by arguing that "*the primary object of early-twentieth century Latin American labor history should be workers in export production*".¹¹ The political importance of Cuban sugar workers, related throughout this present study, certainly bears out this analysis.

Hobart Spalding, in his general survey of organised labour in Latin America, identifies different subgroups within the working class with different short term interests: industrial or agricultural, blue or white collar, and employees of domestic or foreign capital.¹² Julio Godio takes this approach a stage further and argues that imperialism distorts development towards monoculture and inhibits industrial development. This in turn causes proletarian nuclei to form in areas of activity based on the economic needs of the metropolis.¹³ This is particularly significant in the case of Cuba, where the sugar industry has produced such concentrations of sugar workers. In taking a closer look at the class structure of rural areas, Sidney Mintz criticises those who speak of an undifferentiated "peasantry". He identifies the different strata of small agricultural proprietors and, once these have been excluded, he concludes that "*we are left with the class of landless wage-earning workers, numerous and strong in Oriente*".¹⁴ Lest it be thought that this distinction is peculiar to Cuba, Kevin Middlebrook also clearly distinguishes between workers and small farmers in the case of Mexico.¹⁵

However class relationships cannot be properly understood outside of the wider economic circumstances in which they operate. When profits are high and business is good, employers have little need to resist the socio-economic demands of their employees. In times of economic difficulty, the very survival of an undertaking may depend upon reducing its employment costs. The state of the Cuban economy in the 1950s is a major historical controversy, with academics such as Eric Baklanoff

¹⁰ Roxborough, *The Urban Working Class and Labour Movements in Latin America since 1930* (1994)
Vélez, *The Politics of Conformity in Latin America* (1967)
Landsburger, *Labor Elites* (1967)

¹¹ Berquist, *Labor in Latin America* (1986) pp.3-10

¹² Spalding, *Organized Labor in Latin America* (1977)

¹³ Godio, *Historia del movimiento obrero latinoamericano* (1983) pp.35-38

¹⁴ Mintz, *The Rural Proletariat and the Problem of Rural Proletarian Consciousness* (1977) pp.35-45

¹⁵ Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution : Labor, the state, and authoritarianism in Mexico* (1995) pp.14-20

providing data which indicates a high level of prosperity.¹⁶ The US Department of State sums up this argument as follows:

*An enduring myth is that 1950's Cuba was a socially and economically backward country whose development was jump-started by the Castro government. In fact, according to readily available historical data, Cuba was a relatively advanced country in 1958, certainly by Latin American standards and, in some areas, by world standards.*¹⁷

The alternative position, describing the poverty in Batista's Cuba, particularly in rural areas, is perhaps most graphically expressed by the contemporary articles of Oscar Pino-Santos, recently republished for the 50th anniversary celebrations. For example:

*The annual "per capita" income is barely \$340. This is a consequence of the underdeveloped state of the economy, which is reflected in the material conditions of those social groups that make up the majority of the Cuban people, who are weighed down by unemployment, underemployment and generally low incomes.*¹⁸

This argument seems to be informed more by post-1959 political considerations than by a real analysis of the economy at the time. The "Truslow" Report, compiled by a delegation from the World Bank in 1951, certainly points to a considerable number of economic problems faced by the country.¹⁹ This is substantiated by a contemporary report from the ILO which, while proposing different solutions, confirms Truslow's analysis of the problems and quotes wage data which largely confirms the analysis of Oscar Pino-Santos.²⁰ Therefore, I argue, the real question was "Prosperity for whom?" The relative prosperity of middle and upper class Cubans was obtained at the expense of most ordinary workers, who saw their wages and conditions attacked in order to maintain business profitability.

Scholarship on the economic situation in pre-revolutionary Cuba tends to divide into two camps. Scholars from inside Cuba focus mainly on the economic problems which the revolution inherited; the best of these studies are those by Julio Le Riverend and Alejandro García and Oscar Zanetti. Le Riverend, in two different books with, confusingly, the same title, provides an economic history of Cuba, starting from the arrival of Columbus and finishing in the 1950s.²¹ Zanetti and García's book on the United Fruit Company, while specifically about that one company, gives a wealth of

¹⁶ Baklanoff, *Cuba on the Eve of Socialist Transition* (1998)

¹⁷ US Dept. of State, *Zenith and Eclipse* (2002) n.pag

¹⁸ Pino-Santos, *Los años 50* (2008) p.90 [my translation]

¹⁹ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951)

²⁰ Cox, *Some human problems of industrial development* (1952)

²¹ Le Riverend, *Historia económica de Cuba* (1972)

Le Riverend, *Historia económica de Cuba* (1974)

information about the economic context in which it operated.²² Zanetti has updated this work in a recently published overview of the political economy of Cuba during the pre-revolutionary Republic.²³ These, and similar studies from inside Cuba, seek to show that the economic development of the island was held back and distorted by the baleful influence of "North American Imperialism". Those authors not based on the island, whether sympathetic or not, tend to write about the attempted solutions the revolution proposed to the economic problems of the island although, while primarily aimed at discussing the political economy of post-revolutionary Cuba, nevertheless frequently give short introductions to the general state of the economy in the run up to the rebel victory.²⁴ The picture that emerges from both of these camps is of an economy based very heavily on sugar export with most of the agricultural land held by huge plantations closely linked with US capital, which also dominated the financial services industry and the utility companies. The national industrial bourgeoisie were weak and politically subservient to the interests of the sugar oligarchy.²⁵ There is also general agreement on the high level of corruption involved in both business and political circles.

This thesis will re-examine the economic situation of pre-revolutionary Cuba as critical to understanding the working class response to the dictatorship as well as the authoritarian measures used to implement the economic policies of the regime. In so doing, the thesis contests the widely held belief among leading scholars of the Cuban Revolution that economic conditions did not contribute greatly to the rebel victory.²⁶

The dominant position of sugar in the Cuban economy has led scholars to privilege analysis of the island's relationship to the world market in general and to the United States in particular. Alan Dye, Richard Sicotte, Brian Pollitt, Oscar Pino-Santos and Arnaldo Silva have all written accounts of the international aspects of Cuban sugar production demonstrating that the falling price of sugar on the world market led to a

²² Zanetti & García, *United Fruit Company*, (1976)

²³ Le Riverend, *La República* (1973)

Zanetti, *La República: notas sobre economía y sociedad* (2006)

²⁴ Huberman & Sweezy, *Cuba: Anatomy of a Revolution* (1968)

Boorstein, *The Economic Transformation of Cuba* (1968)

O'Connor, *The Origins of Socialism in Cuba* (1970)

Martínez Alier, *Cuba: economía y sociedad* (1972)

Mesa Lago, *The Labor Sector and Socialist Distribution in Cuba* (1968)

²⁵ Marques Dolz & Fierro, *The Nonsugar Industrial Bourgeoisie and Industrialization in Cuba* (1995)

²⁶ eg. Benjamin, *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution* (1990)

Domínguez, *Cuba: Order and Revolution* (1978)

Draper, *Castro's Revolution: Myths and Realities* (1962)

Pérez Stable, *The Cuban Revolution* (1999)

crisis for the whole Cuban economy.²⁷ Cuban sugar workers had a particularly militant history, establishing soviets and armed militias during their 1933 strike.²⁸ This started a tradition in which the trade union, industrial action, self-reliance and solidarity became a defining part of the sugar workers' identity and self-image. The seasonal nature of their employment militated against bureaucratically stable trade union organisation, with union membership numbers fluctuating widely according to the time of year. However, this slowed the tendency towards conservatism inherent in traditional skilled trade unionism. Thus, sugar workers had a tradition of cane-burning sabotage as a tactic for enforcing their demands.²⁹ The fragmenting effects of the seasonal harvest cycle were offset by the fact that most sugar workers lived in communities in which they formed the overwhelming majority, thereby reinforcing workplace solidarity with community feeling in times of industrial struggle. In many ways, despite the apparent dissimilarity, the sugar workers' tradition of struggle and their vital place in the national economy gave them a similar leading position in the life of the Cuban labour movement to that occupied by mineworkers in Europe. Also like European miners, sugar workers had a close relationship with railway workers. Not only is there an industrial link between the two trades, as the railway industry in Cuba was dependent on the sugar industry, but also, as Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro García tell us, that economic link was reflected in a tradition of mutual solidarity.³⁰

These structural considerations are important in defining the boundaries of the working class, but they need to be nuanced when considering the apparent paradox embodied in Geroge Orwell's remark:

*I have no particular love for the idealised "worker" as he appears in the bourgeois Communist's mind, but when I see an actual flesh-and-blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask myself which side I am on.*³¹

For policemen, along with those other "natural enemies" of organised labour, the scab and the manager, would appear to be "workers" in the structural sense of being in paid employment and having no ownership of the means of production. To resolve this, many writers have explored the question of "identity", "culture" or "consciousness".³²

²⁷ Silva Leon, *Cuba y el mercado internacional azucarero* (1975)
Pollitt, *The Rise and Fall of the Cuban Sugar Economy* (2004)
Pino Santos, *La cuota azucarera de Cuba en Estados Unidos* (1955)

²⁸ Carr, *Mill Occupations and Soviets* (1996) p.141

²⁹ McGillivray, *Blazing Cane* (2009)

³⁰ Zanetti & García, *Sugar and Railroads* (1998)

³¹ George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938)

³² eg. Nash et al., *Ideology and Social Change in Latin America, Volume 1: the emergence of worker*

E.P. Thompson argues that:

*Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.*³³

Nicolás Iñigo Carrera pursues this argument and adds that, in order to understand the nature of the working class in its totality, it must be seen in the context of the class struggle.³⁴ This relationship between classes has been summarised by Judith Orr:

*Under capitalism, a minority class owns and controls the means of producing and accumulating wealth. The working class only exists inasmuch as it is exploited by this class. The capitalists themselves depend on workers selling their labour power to them and creating a surplus off which they can live, invest in future production etc."*³⁵

The class struggle takes place between the contending classes over the distribution of that surplus. Milciades Peña brings the argument full circle in arguing that class consciousness develops in struggle and that this development leads to further struggles.³⁶

There are two principal approaches to the study of labour history: the institutional history of workers' organisations and the history of militant, sometimes insurgent, movements. The former approach, most famously pioneered by Sidney and Beatrice Webb,³⁷ concerns itself primarily with the activities of trade union leaders, official organisational developments and the relationship with national and international politics.³⁸ In such studies, industrial relations and negotiations in times of social peace are generally given more coverage than the occasional strike or demonstration.

A number of studies of the labour movement in Latin America have taken this institutional approach, perhaps the most typical example being Robert Alexander's, *Organized Labour in Latin America*.³⁹ In this, he synthesises the larger studies he has

consciousness (1975)

³³ Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) p.9

³⁴ Iñigo Carrera, *El concepto de clase obrera* (2003) pp.7-8

³⁵ Orr, *Marxism and Feminism Today* (2010) p.43

³⁶ Peña, *Introducción al pensamiento de Marx* (2000)

³⁷ Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (1920)

³⁸ Recent examples of such work in the British context are:

Fraser, *British Trade Unions, 1707-1918* (2007)

Sewell, *In The Cause of Labour* (2003)

Reid, *United We Stand* (2004)

³⁹ Alexander, *Organized Labor in Latin America* (1965)

produced on Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and, of course, Cuba. A more recent book by Gerald Greenfield and Sheldon Maram catalogues and provides a brief history of the vast majority of the labour organisations on the continent, while Ian Roxborough's contribution to Leslie Bethell's *Cambridge History of Latin America* provides a general overview.⁴⁰ These studies provide a useful base from which to compare the situation of labour in Cuba in the 1950s with that obtaining elsewhere in Latin America. A picture emerges of the 1950s in which the Cuban CTC has the largest membership per head of the population, over one million members out of a total population of about 6 million.⁴¹ The nearest in comparable membership density were the unions in Argentina and Mexico. These were closely linked with the ruling parties, the Peronists and the PRI respectively. Like the Cuban CTC, they served as important props to their regimes, but with the important difference that they were actively involved in their countries' politics, while the leadership of the CTC provided support for Batista by endeavouring to keep the union membership away from political involvement. Brazil under the second Vargas administration was also able to incorporate organised labour, in part by the use of a compulsory check-off of union subscriptions similar to the Cuban model. The Chilean CUT followed a more European pattern, being led by socialists, communists and anarchists following its reunification in 1953. It would play an important role in the election of Salvador Allende. Bolivia and Cuba both have an economy dominated by a single industry, in this case mining. The miners' union (FSTMB) played a dominant role in the Bolivian labour movement and may be compared with the Cuban sugar workers. The major difference is that the FSTMB maintained a broadly democratic structure and a militant leadership, while in the 1950s the Cuban *Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Azucareros* (FNTA - National Federation of Sugar Workers) was far from democratic. The adoption of the "Thesis of Pulacayo" by the Bolivian miners' union in 1946 was the only serious attempt in 20th century Latin America to bridge the divide between a stable trade union organisation and revolutionary class struggle.

The other approach to labour history, more concerned with the activities of rank and file workers and focusing on protests, strikes and similar confrontational behaviour, originates in the work of Marxists such as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm; it sometimes referred to as "history from below". This way of looking at labour has been

⁴⁰ Greenfield & Maram, *Latin American labor organizations* (1987)

Roxborough, *The Urban Working Class and Labour Movements in Latin America since 1930* (1994)

⁴¹ see chapter 1, particularly Table 1

common in the historiography of North American labour, with particular attention paid to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the period around the First World War and the period of agitation and struggle associated with the founding of the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) in the 1930s. Likewise there are many such histories of militant labour in Britain.⁴² The role of the trade union bureaucracy is rarely considered as a factor in determining the course of organised labour. The Webbs, writing in the 1890s, described this bureaucracy as the civil service of the trade union movement, which became a "class apart" with their own interests but, with the exception of Mike Haynes, Tony Cliff and Donny Gluckstein, little has been done to extend this work.⁴³ It is part of the task of this thesis to fill that gap.

When looking at the history of organised labour outside the metropolitan countries, the relationship between workers and employers is complicated by the subordinate position of Third World capital to the large multinational corporations and financial institutions, frequently supported by threats of intervention by the armed forces of Europe and the United States. This affects the nature of nationalist politics in underdeveloped countries and frequently gives working class politics a nationalist colouring. The work of Peter Alexander, Pete Dwyer and Leo Zeilig, from their research into labour struggles in Africa, has broadened our understanding of this factor. Parallel experiences in the Anglophone Caribbean experience have been well documented by Richard Hart.⁴⁴ In the Latin American context, James Dunkerley's *Rebellion in the Veins* integrates militant, insurgent workers into the broader context of the Bolivian revolution.

There are a few studies of Cuban labour that cover the 1950s, but all of these have failed to take account of the complexity and multilayered nature of working class industrial and political organisation. Thus, James O'Connor concentrates on the labour

⁴² eg. for the USA:

Preis, *Labor's Giant Step* (1972)

Newslinger, *Fighting Back - the American Working Class in the 1930s* (2012)

Renshaw, *Wobblies: Story Of The IWW And Syndicalism in the USA* (1999)

and some recent work on British labour struggles:

Raw, *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and Their Place in History* (2009)

Barnsley, *Breaking Their Chains: Mary Macarthur and the Chainmakers' Strike* (2010)

⁴³ Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (1920) pp.468-470

Cliff & Gluckstein, *Marxism and Trade Union Struggle: The General Strike of 1926* (1989)

Haynes, *The British Working Class in Revolt* (1984) pp.87-116

⁴⁴ Alexander, *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labour and Politics in South Africa, 1939-48* (2000)

Hart, *Rise and organize : the birth of the workers and national movements in Jamaica, 1936-1939* (1989)

Dwyer & Zeilig, *African Struggles Today: Social Movements Since Independence* (2012)

market rather than workers' self-activity, while Robert Alexander and Harold Sims centre their attention almost entirely on the official movement, particularly the actions of the leadership of the trade union federation, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC). Efrén Córdova, who is frequently quoted by other writers, sees the working class movement through the eyes of the union leader, the employer and the government official, with little reference to the activity of the ordinary worker.⁴⁵

There are some studies of individual industries: Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro Garcia on the railway industry, Gillian McGillivray on the sugar industry, Jana Lipman on the workers in the US base in Guantánamo Bay and Jean Stubbs on the tobacco industry.⁴⁶ Additionally, Angelina Rojas has studied important aspects of the working class movement in the 1950s, in particular the corruption of the trade union bureaucracy and the class struggles of the year 1955.⁴⁷ There is also clearly a revival of interest in this area amongst regional historians in Cuba, for example the work of Pedro Machado on the Matanzas textile industry or the detailed account of the 1955 sugar workers' strike in the town of Ciego de Avila by the staff of the local archive.⁴⁸ Gladys García Pérez and Clara Chávez Alvarez have provided us with valuable scholarship on the regional struggles of Matanzas.⁴⁹ It is the inter-relation of the concrete experiences of these different groups of workers that enables an assessment of their ability to act together in defence of their common interests. Where I believe this thesis advances the contributions centred on individual industries is that, by considering the many different sectors of the Cuban labour movement taking part in militant industrial and political action during the 1950s, a more generalised picture emerges. Different responses were based on a mixture of factors, subjective and objective, but patterns can be seen and it becomes clear that the significance of the workers' struggles in this period is much greater than the sum of the parts.

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- ⁴⁵ O'Connor, *Origins of Socialism in Cuba* (1970)
Córdova, *Castro and the Cuban Labor Movement* (1987)
Alexander, *History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002)
Sims, *Cuba* (1992), *Cuban Labor and the Communist Party* (1985), *Cuba's Organized Labour* (1998)
- ⁴⁶ Zanetti & García, *United Fruit Company, un caso del dominio imperialista en Cuba* (1976)
Zanetti & García, *Sugar and Railroads* (1998)
McGillivray, *Blazing Cane* (2009)
Lipman, *Guantánamo: A Working-Class History* (2009)
Stubbs, *Tobacco on the Periphery* (1985)
- ⁴⁷ Rojas, *El mujalismo en el movimiento obrero cubano* (1983)
Rojas, *1955* (1998)
- ⁴⁸ Pérez Garcia et al., *Invierno Caliente* (2008)
Machado, *El movimiento obrero henequenero* (2011)
- ⁴⁹ García Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution: armed struggle in Cuba, 1952-1959* (1998)
Chávez Alvarez, *Matanzas de rojo y negro 1952-1958* (2007)

Christian Chevandier's study of French railway workers persuasively argues that their identity was formed in struggle with their employers.⁵⁰ Tony Kapcia's recent study of culture and identity in Cuba sees identity as a question of "*collective self-confidence*" which asserts that "*we are this and not that*".⁵¹ As nations are divided into classes, each socio-economic class will attempt to interpret national identity and the national interest in ways that are best suited to their own interests and reinforce their own "collective self-confidence". A Cuban example of this is the response of Jesús Menéndez, leader of the sugar workers union until his murder in 1948, to the slogan "*sin azúcar no hay país*" (without sugar there is no nation), which was used by the sugar oligarchy to justify their privileged position. Menéndez turned the tables by constantly repeating "*azúcar al servicio de Cuba*" (sugar at the service of Cuba), thereby attempting to reinforce the importance of those who cut the cane in the national myth.⁵²

A particular theme emerges here in response to the economic domination of Latin America by capitalist interests from the United States and Western Europe. Thus, Olga Cabrera and Jean Stubbs both examine the origins of the mutually reinforcing combination of class consciousness and nationalism, which is a feature of the region and a distinct contrast with Europe, where these sentiments are normally in contradiction.⁵³ Similarly, Alan Knight writes of the Cananea miners' strike of 1907, where the US workers sided with the employers and opened fire on the Mexican workers, who were demanding the dismissal of foreigners and "Mexico for the Mexicans". This produced a nation-wide wave of sympathy which further reinforced working class nationalist sentiment.⁵⁴ John Dumoulin, when considering the 1917 Cuban sugar strike, amplifies this point, situating the strike in the context of the world sugar crisis and the domestic class struggle, showing how the subordination of the Cuban bourgeoisie to US imperialism gave a patriotic flavour to the workers' industrial action.⁵⁵ There is clearly a consensus that a culture of proletarian nationalism underpins working class identity in Latin America. In the Cuban context, workers developed an identity and political culture in which the concepts of class and nation are inextricably linked. Indeed, if the ruling elite are seen as pawns of a foreign power, they can be condemned as traitors to the

⁵⁰ Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève: la construction d'une identité* (2002)

⁵¹ Kapcia, *Havana: the making of Cuban culture* (2005) p.5-6, 13

⁵² García Galló, *General de las cañas* (1998) p.88

⁵³ Cabrera, *Los que viven por sus manos* (1985)

Stubbs, *Tobacco on the Periphery* (1985)

⁵⁴ Knight, *The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution* (1984) p.70

⁵⁵ Dumoulin, *Azúcar y lucha de clases, 1917* (1980)

nation and give workers struggling against them increased self-confidence and self identification.

If we see culture only as another word for "way of life", then white collar workers could present a difficulty. Those who base their concept of social class on dress, lifestyle, income, education or attitudes, have a problem when analysing the class position of white collar workers such as bank clerks.⁵⁶ This is to fail to differentiate between an economic class and a status group.⁵⁷ However, if we use Frederick Engels's definition of the working class as: "*The class of wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live*" there is no such problem because administrative workers sell their labour power in the same manner as train drivers and are therefore equally proletarian, merely having different skills and being better paid.⁵⁸ Whether or not they saw themselves as "workers" is a factor of their self-identity, which varies over time with the ups and downs of the class struggle. We shall see how this was quite clear to the Havana bank workers when they went on unofficial strike in 1955 against attempts by the banking employers to forbid union membership to a large number of their colleagues on the grounds that they were involved in "confidential" work and that trade union membership would be inappropriate.⁵⁹ The Havana bank workers' fight for trade union rights showed that the vast majority of them were in little doubt about their own class allegiance. Rural sugar workers and urban bank clerks have very different standards of living, work experience and cultural practices and such differences can give rise to sectional divisions within organised labour. However, Colin Lewis points to the role of ideology (in this case nationalism) as a vehicle for unifying groups from different backgrounds.⁶⁰ Proletarian anti-imperialist nationalism is a powerful incentive to overcome divisions and fragmentation between different workers in culturally distinct groups.

The dominant and most politically charged element in 20th century Cuban historiography is the question of the relationship with the United States. In this area, it is therefore more important than usual to have an understanding of the point of view of the

⁵⁶ Smith, *The Shape of the Working Class* (2007) pp.49-70

⁵⁷ Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History* (2006) p.127

⁵⁸ Marx & Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1971) p.48

⁵⁹ "Bancarios", *Bohemia* (September 18th 1955) p.75 [Where articles from the news magazine *Bohemia* are credited with an author and a title, this will be given in the footnotes and the full reference made in the bibliography. Where the report is from the "*En Cuba*" section of the magazine, as here, the edition date and the short identifying title will be given along with, where available, the page number. Page numbering was sporadic in *Bohemia* during the 1950s and many editions were not paginated]

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Workers and 'Subalterns'* (2003) p.9

author. In this respect, Louis Pérez's "Survey of Twentieth-Century Historiography" serves as a valuable guide to the historic relationship between Cuba and the United States.⁶¹ In particular, I have found the work of Morris Morley and Leland Johnson to be useful as they both consider the relationship from an economic point of view, examining the business interests which underpin the political and military interaction.⁶²

By the start of the 1950s, the earlier crude interventions by the United States in Cuban affairs moved to a more subtle form of economic domination. This resulted in a reduction in anti-imperialist feeling. Indeed a fashion for US cultural products and consumer goods developed amongst those who could afford them.⁶³ This trend was reflected in the newspapers and in formal political discourse, leading writers such as Samuel Farber to deny the existence of generalised anti-American sentiments.⁶⁴ He does not, however, specifically consider class differences in attitude. Regional variations in attitude are also often neglected. Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro García show US investment in both sugar and railways was concentrated in the eastern end of the island and it is here that the highest levels of working class militancy accompanied by significant anti-imperialist sentiment was to be found.⁶⁵ The United Fruit Company forced its will on the Cuban state by a mixture of threats, blackmail and bribery. It controlled politics in Oriente province, where its operations were based, by corrupting local politicians.⁶⁶ United Fruit had a close relationship with the US State Department, distributing anti-communist propaganda produced in Washington and using its economic position to advance US foreign policy. If "The Company" corruptly controls local politics and openly works to advance the interests of a foreign power, the struggle for workers' rights and broader questions of democracy and national independence become intertwined.⁶⁷ The pattern described above is confirmed and extended by my examination of other archival sources. The railway strikes of 1954-55 (chapter 3) had their strongest manifestation in the east. The strikes and demonstrations against state terror mainly occurred in Oriente (chapter 5) and the August 1957 general strike started in Santiago (chapter 6). The propaganda put out by the organisers of these activities

⁶¹ Pérez, *Essays on Cuban History* (1995) pp. 115-143

Pérez, *Cuba and the United States : Ties of Singular Intimacy* (1990)

⁶² Johnson, *U.S. Business Interests in Cuba and the Rise of Castro* (1965)

Morley, *The U.S. Imperial State in Cuba 1952-1958: Policymaking and Capitalist Interests* (1982)

⁶³ Pérez, *Cuba and the United States* (1990) p.208

⁶⁴ Farber, *Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006) p.179

⁶⁵ Zanetti & García, *Caminos para Azucar* (1998) p.208

⁶⁶ Zanetti & García, *United Fruit Company* (1976)

⁶⁷ Chomsky et al., *The Cuba reader* (2003) pp.291-293

show a higher level of "anti-imperialism" than equivalent material in the west of the island. The fact that this propaganda is associated with successful actions would indicate that it struck a chord with large numbers of workers.

As Maurice Zeitlin argues:

*The workers' fight to win full citizenship in their society, their struggle to enlarge their social and political rights and to improve their conditions of life was in the main directed against foreign interests, essentially those of American corporations.*⁶⁸

These feelings reinforced working class nationalist politics and gave credence to ideas of economic nationalism as a solution to poverty and insecurity.

An important recent advance in labour history has been the challenge to the concept that organised labour is male. Sometimes, this has taken the form of "rescue history" such as Sandra Bloodworth's narrative of the part played by women in the miners' struggles at Broken Hill in Australia or Louise Raw's revision of the Bryant and May "matchgirl's" strike, wherein she establishes that the strike was not led by the middle-class journalist Annie Besant, but was initiated and run by socialist and republican women already working in the factory.⁶⁹ In the context of the Americas, Joel Wolfe's work on the Brazilian textile industry not only sees beyond the formal structures of the trade unions, it firmly establishes the combativity and capacity for self leadership of women workers.⁷⁰ As far as Cuba is concerned, Jean Stubbs and Olga Cabrera have written on the tobacco stemmers but, as I have argued elsewhere, working class women have otherwise been largely ignored.⁷¹ Dana Frank's contribution to *Three Strikes*, which describes the fight of the Detroit Woolworth "salesgirls" in 1937, provides obvious parallels with the "commercial workers" in Cuba during the 1950s, a militant group of mainly women workers who were instrumental in starting the general strike in Santiago in 1957.⁷² In a direct parallel with Detroit, Woolworth's saleswomen in Manzanillo launched a town-wide general strike in 1955, in solidarity with the town's striking textile workers. However, the historiography still fails to accord any real significance to the role of female family members during industrial disputes in male

⁶⁸ Zeitlin, *Revolutionary politics and the Cuban working class* (1967) p.288

⁶⁹ Bloodworth, *Militant spirits: The rebel women of Broken Hill* (1998)

Raw, *Striking a Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and Their Place in History* (2009)

⁷⁰ Wolfe, *Working Women, Working Men* (1993)

⁷¹ Cabrera, *El mundo de la despalilladora cubana* (1989)

Stubbs, *Tobacco on the Periphery* (1985)

Cushion, *A Working Class Heroine is also Something to Be* (2010)

⁷² Zinn et al., *Three Strikes: Miners, Musicians, Salesgirls, and the Fighting Spirit of Labor's Last Century* (2002)

dominated industries.

The "Women's Auxiliary" and "Women's Support Group" are normally treated as just that, a useful appendage, but far from being essential to the victory of a struggle. The literature seems to recognise the crucial, determinant role such groups can play in only one case; the Flint Women's Emergency Brigade during the 1937 General Motors sit-down.⁷³ Yet the documentary film *Harlan County, USA*, vividly portrays the way in which an ultimately successful miners' strike would have collapsed if not for the determination of the miners' wives.⁷⁴ My own earlier research into the 1941 French miners strike under Nazi occupation revealed the role of miners' wives taking over picketing when their husbands were in hiding to avoid being forced to return to work at gunpoint.⁷⁵ Cuban women played a similar role in support of the Guantánamo railway workers in 1957-58. To deal with this gap in the literature, Elizabeth Faue proposes an approach that she calls 'community history' as a "*vehicle to overcome the class-gender split*". She produces a more rounded picture of workers' struggles by including women workers, male workers' wives and families as well as the wider neighbourhood in her analysis.⁷⁶ In her study of the Minneapolis labour movement, she looks at the role of women as part of the wider community during the 1934 truckers' strike, which led to a city-wide general strike. She writes of the "*union as a way of life which involved the entire community*". Writing about Cuban workers in Tampa in an earlier period, Nancy Hewitt writes of:

*The intertwining of family, community and shop floor issues in pursuit of both Cuban independence and workers' control ensured that non-wage earning Latins would play crucial roles in Labor battles as well.*⁷⁷

In terms of the history of the Cuban revolution, the literature has focused mainly on a few women leaders such as Vilma Espin or Celia Sanchez. There is some recent work published in Cuba on the role of women in the urban underground, for example Gladys García Pérez and Esperanza Méndez Oliva, while Linda Klouzal has published a book on women in the Rebel Army.⁷⁸ However, these studies treat their working class women protagonists as individual citizens, divorced from their communities, rather than

⁷³ eg. Hassett, *Never Again Just A Woman* (1994)

Rosenthal, *Striking Flint* (1996)

⁷⁴ Kopple, *Harlan County, USA* (1976)

⁷⁵ Cushion, *The 1941 Miners' Strike in Northern France* (2006)

⁷⁶ Faue, *Community of suffering & struggle* (1991) p.xii

⁷⁷ Hewitt, *The Voice of Virile Labor* (1991)

⁷⁸ Méndez Oliva, *La estirpe de Mariana en Las Villas* (2006)

García Pérez, *Mujer y Revolución* (2009)

Klouzal, *Women and Rebel Communities in the Cuban Insurgent Movement, 1952-1959* (2008)

as participants in collective action.

Tony Kapcia's concept of "cultural communities" provides a way of looking at community history which helps us to see similarities and differences between the self-images of different groups.⁷⁹ This works best if it is seen as individuals belonging to several different, competing communities, defined by their profession, their perceived social status, their religious beliefs, their ethnicity, as well as their neighbourhood, their region and the nation as a whole. Political and class struggles are often fought out in terms of a struggle between these different identities, for example the intersection between race and class. In the historiography of labour in Latin America, most recent attention in this area has focused on indigenous peoples, for example Paulo Drinot's study of workers, race and the Peruvian state.⁸⁰ Given that the "race" question in Cuba mainly concerned the descendants of African slaves rather than an indigenous population, the Cuban situation bears much closer comparison with North America or the Caribbean. Alejandro de la Fuente looks mainly at the question of race from the point of view of the integration of people of colour into employment and affirms that, in the 1950s, black workers were still concentrated in lower paid jobs with lower chances of promotion, although he finds a trend towards a reduction in inequality as one moves through the first half of the 20th century.⁸¹ De la Fuente does however make the point that no significant racial division in earnings existed amongst industrial and agricultural workers which, he asserts, points to successful anti-discrimination work by trade unions, arguing that "*race made little difference amongst the poorest in society*".⁸² The tone of the discourse on race in Cuba in the 1950s would seem to indicate that the main problem was not seen as racial divisions between workers undermining their ability to fight for their common interests, but rather a question of discrimination by employers and businesses. It should be made clear that, in the context of the present study, we are concerned with the collective reactions of workers and there is considerable evidence of white workers electing and loyally supporting black trade union leaders because of their organisational and representational skills. Black workers' radicalism in Cuba had, since the 1930s, mainly expressed itself through the trade unions and the communist party, particularly amongst the dock, tobacco and sugar workers, where they often took leadership positions. The solidarity with other groups in struggle, which was frequently

⁷⁹ Kapcia, *Havana* (2005) p.5-6, 13

⁸⁰ Drinot, *The Allure of Labor* (2011)

⁸¹ Fuente, *Race and Inequality in Cuba, 1899-1981* (1995) pp.131-168

⁸² Fuente, *Race, National Discourse, and Politics in Cuba* (1998) p.60

shown by black workers in these trades, would have also worked towards a reduction of racism elsewhere.

De la Fuente argues that the Cuban communist party had a long tradition of anti-racist activity, pointing out that "*under communist leadership, the labor movement incorporated racial equality as one of its programmatic goals*", while Hobart Spalding writes that "*revolutionary politics represented one of the few areas in which minority groups got equal treatment*".⁸³ I would argue, following Phillip Foner, that it is a common experience that racist divisions between workers tend to decrease at times of heightened struggle.⁸⁴ Not that this is always the case, for the outcome also depends on the political activities of people and parties. In the aftermath of the anti-Machado revolution in the 1930s, there was much racist violence directed at immigrant workers from the British Caribbean and Haiti, although this was more often a case of native-born workers against immigrants than white against black, as many Spanish immigrants were persecuted as well.⁸⁵ There was considerable movement between Cuba and the British West Indies during the 1920s and 1930s, mainly of contract labourers coming to work in the Cuban sugar industry. The communist party and the Cuban trade unions had a significant influence on this labour force and it is a matter of record that, during the labour rebellions of the 1930s in the British West Indian islands, a number of the rank and file leaders of this uprising had learned their politics in Cuba.⁸⁶ Later, some revolutionary working class militants in Cuba during the 1950s were of Jamaican and Haitian heritage. I believe that, in the 1950s, the prevailing relationship is typified by that of the largely black Santiago port workers and the predominantly white Bacardi rum workers, who repeatedly showed great mutual solidarity, as well as co-ordinating their struggles, despite having different political allegiances in addition to their ethnic diversity.

It is this identification with other workers, both in the same trade and more widely, that gives rise to the labour movement, almost universally in the form of trade

⁸³ Fuente, *Race, National Discourse, and Politics in Cuba* (1998) p.59
Spalding, *Organized Labor in Latin America* (1977) p.234

⁸⁴ Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* (1974)

⁸⁵ Carr, *Identity, Class, and Nation: Black Immigrant Workers, Cuban Communism, and the Sugar Insurgency* (1998)
Giovannetti, *Black British subjects in Cuba* (2001)

⁸⁶ Reddock, *Elma Francois : the NWCSA and the worker's struggle for change in the Caribbean* (1988)
Hart, *Rise and organize : the birth of the workers and national movements in Jamaica, 1936-1939* (1989)
Bolland, *On the march : labour rebellions in the British Caribbean, 1934-39* (1995)

unions. Most studies use the terms "organised labour", "the labour movement" and "unions" more or less interchangeably.⁸⁷ However, following Robin Kelley's references to the earlier work of George Rawick, in order to obtain a rounded picture, in addition to the formal trade union structure, it is necessary to consider the activities of shop stewards, independently minded union officials, strike committees, regional committees, mass meetings and unofficial networks of militants, all of which make up the wider labour movement and interact together to produce the dynamic of industrial action.⁸⁸

The shared experience of exploitation pushes workers to see themselves as a social class, but this has to be set against the fragmenting effects of competition for jobs as well as differences in status such as skilled or unskilled, rural or urban, administrative or manual, permanent or temporary. To this must be added the further potentially fragmenting effects of race and gender. The exact degree of fragmentation is not structurally determined, but rather it is the agency of real people acting within bounds set by the economic structures that determines the final outcome. Therefore, the question is not whether the Cuban working class existed as an abstract concept, but whether they showed a collectivist response to their problems that, when politically necessary, managed to overcome the fragmentation caused by the nature of the Cuban economy and the repression of a dictatorial regime. The Cold War would provide just such a test.

Revolution and Counter-revolution

Greg Grandin and Gilbert Joseph have interpreted the Cold War in terms of revolution and counter-revolution, a useful alternative viewpoint to those who base their approach on international diplomacy.⁸⁹ During the Second World War, because of the need to gain popular support for the war against Nazi Germany, the United States government supported the development of socially oriented democracies in Latin America which granted rights and improved conditions to organised labour. At the same time, in order to ease the alliance with the Soviet Union, communist parties were

⁸⁷ Alexander, *Organized Labor in Latin America* (1965), Spalding, *The Workers' Struggle: 1850-1961* (1974) and Roxborough, *The Urban Working Class and Labour Movements in Latin America since 1930* (1994) give general overviews of labour on the continent, while McGuire, *Peronism without Perón* (1997), James, *Resistance and Integration* (1988) and Drinot, *The Allure of Labor* (2011) are examples of country specific studies.

⁸⁸ Kelley, *An Archaeology of Resistance* (1992) p.296
Rawick, *Working Class Self-Activity* (1969)

⁸⁹ Grandin & Joseph, *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War* (2010)

legalised in most Allied countries. These communist parties, in return, worked for internal social peace and, in exchange for a few reforms, prioritised the war effort over the normal economic concerns of their working class and peasant supporters. This situation changed radically after the defeat of the Axis powers and the USSR became the new "totalitarian" enemy.

The post-war anti-communist hysteria, whipped up to justify the change of international allegiances by demonising the Soviet Union, was also used to cover the installation of pro-business, authoritarian regimes throughout Latin America as a whole, as Stephen G. Rabe describes in *The Killing Zone*.⁹⁰ Batista's coup in 1952 and the subsequent dictatorship is an example of this trend. These regimes then proceeded to cancel the wartime reforms and moved to restore profitability in the difficult economic circumstances following the end of hostilities. In this context, the 1954 coup in Guatemala has been the subject of much scholarly attention, but until recently mainly seen from the US government point of view with discussion centring on the precise role of the CIA. Piero Gleijeses provides a more rounded account, seeing the affair from a Guatemalan perspective.⁹¹ Another recent revision of the history of the Guatemalan coup based on previously unused sources is Greg Grandin's and Naomi Klein's *The Last Colonial Massacre*.⁹²

Guatemala provides an interesting point of reference with Cuba during the post-war era, not only because of the two countries' shared experience of hosting the United Fruit Company, which has been the subject of a recent resurgence of interest in Cuba, but also because of personal connections between the leader of the Cuban communist party, Blas Roca, and Guatemalan trade unionists, as well as the presence of Che Guevarra in the country during the coup.⁹³ Fidel Castro also invited Jacobo Arbenz, the deposed President of Guatemala, to Cuba in the 1960s. Cindy Forster has produced an account, based on archival sources and oral history, which concentrates on local level, grass roots activism amongst Guatemalan agricultural workers and which argues that the employers' desire to curb the militancy of the banana workers on the estates of

⁹⁰ Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (2011)

⁹¹ Gordon, *A Case History of U. S. Subversion: Guatemala, 1954* (1971)

Cullather, *Secret History: The Cia's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (2006)

Glejises, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954* (1991)

⁹² Grandin & Klein, *The Last Colonial Massacre* (2011)

⁹³ Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala* (1982) p.91

Fernández, *United Fruit Sugar Co.* (2011)

Zanetti & García, *United Fruit Company* (1976)

the United Fruit Company was an important factor in the coup and the imposition of the subsequent dictatorship.⁹⁴ This coup is an example of the use of anti-communist rhetoric to provide cover for a generalised attack on workers' living standards and as an excuse to victimise militant shop stewards, irrespective of their politics, a right-wing offensive that was not just a Latin American phenomenon.

In June 1947, the US Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Law, which severely restricted domestic union activity and shifted the balance of forces away from labour towards the employers. The US trade union federations, the American Federation of Labour (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO), did not resist the Taft-Hartley legislation but, as Jon Kofas's study of the World Federation of Trade Unions shows, actively supported the US foreign policy agenda.⁹⁵ In retrospect, Serafino Romualdi's 1947 article entitled *Labor and Democracy in Latin America* can be seen as a declaration of Cold War within the international labour movement.⁹⁶ This resulted in the pro-US *Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores* (ORIT - Interamerican Regional Organisation of Workers) splitting from the pro-Soviet *Confederación de Trabajadores de America Latina* (CTAL - Latin American Confederation of Workers). Robert Alexander has recently produced an institutional history of international labour organisations in Latin America, while Jon Kofas provides useful perspective on the ORIT / CTAL division.⁹⁷

The two decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall have seen a new generation of studies to emerge on the history of the communist parties of Latin America, based more on academic research and less on the contemporary demands of Cold War politics.⁹⁸ A

⁹⁴ Forster, *The Time of Freedom: Campesino workers in Guatemala's October Revolution* (2001)

⁹⁵ Kofas, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the World Federation of Trade Unions, 1944-1948* (2002)

⁹⁶ Romualdi, *Labor and Democracy in Latin America* (1947)

⁹⁷ Alexander, *International Labor Organizations and Organized Labor in Latin America and the Caribbean* (2009)

Kofas, *The Struggle for Legitimacy: Latin American Labor and the United States, 1930-1960* (1992) pp.

⁹⁸ Becker, *Mariátegui and Latin American Marxist theory* (1993)

Hatzky, *Julio Antonio Mella* (2008)

Contreras, *Vivencias del Partido Vanguardia Popular* (2008)

Middlebrook, *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, The State, and Authoritarianism in Mexico* (1995)

Carr, *Marxism & Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, (1992)

Vanegas, *International Links to Early Socialism in Colombia* (2008)

Meschkat, *Helpful Intervention? The Impact of the Comintern on Early Colombian Communism* (2008)

Spenser, *Radical Mexico: Limits to the Impact of Soviet Communism* (2008)

Kerssfield, *Contra el Imperio: Historia de la Liga Antiimperialista de las Américas* (2010)

Melgar Bao, *The Anti-Imperialist League of the Americas between the East and Latin America* (2008)

Ulianova & Riquelme, *Chile en los archivos soviéticos* (2009)

picture emerges of a developing communist movement in Latin America more or less following the same line until the mid-1950s, but with many variations based on adaptations to local conditions, alliances and bureaucratic infighting. The support given by the Latin American communist parties for the Allied side in the Second World War papered over many of these cracks, but the Cold War started a process of division. The "Duclos Letter" and the fall from grace of the US communist leader, Earl Browder, started the process of shaking up the region's communists; the Cuban party had been particularly enthusiastic proponents of "Browderism".⁹⁹ Many started to question the "Popular Front" approach after the coup in Guatemala, but real divisions did not appear until after the triumph of the Cuban revolution. Hal Brands has written about the Cold War from an international perspective, covering the post-war decades in the region, while Tanya Harmer uses newly available archive material to consider Cuban involvement in Latin America in the early 1970s.¹⁰⁰ These two books bring to the surface the internal conflicts in Latin American communism between those who would pursue what Barry Carr describes as "Eurocommunism in the Americas" and those who wished to adopt guerrilla based tactics, following the path perceived to have been initiated in Cuba.¹⁰¹ Events outside Latin America also had an influence on this debate and Piero Gleijeses has written of the influence that the Algerian revolution had on events in Cuba through reporting in the weekly magazine *Bohemia*.¹⁰² Therefore, given the importance of the Cuban revolution for these realignments, a study of the developments in Cuban communism in the 1950s will shed light on this evolving situation.

Nicola Miller's *Soviet relations with Latin America*, like much of the historiography of Cuba communism, is concerned with the impact of the Cuban revolution on international Cold War politics and treats the history of the pre-revolutionary communist party as background introduction.¹⁰³ Where there is any consideration of the Cuban communists in the 1950s, it takes the form of a controversy

⁹⁹ Ryan, *Earl Browder : the failure of American communism* (1997)

¹⁰⁰ Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (2010)

Harmer, *Allende's Chile and the Inter-American Cold War* (2011)

¹⁰¹ Carr, *Mexican Communism, 1968-1983 : Eurocommunism in the Americas?* (1985)

Wright, *Latin America in the Era of the Cuban Revolution* (2001)

Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (2010) p.17

¹⁰² Gleijeses, *Cuba's First Venture in Africa* (1996)

"Lo que no dijo Jacques Soustelle", (*Bohemia*) 3 Feb. 1957, pp. 67, 81-2

"Laigrimas, terror y sangre en Argelia", (*Bohemia*) 14 Apr. 1957, pp. 68, 91-3

"Sin piedad y sin salida", (*Bohemia*) 23 June 1957, pp. 10-12

"i Asi es la guerra en Argelia!" (*Bohemia*) 7 July 1957, pp. 8-9, 128-31

¹⁰³ eg Miller, *Soviet relations with Latin America, 1959-1987* (1989)

over the time-scale of the involvement of the communist *Partido Socialista Popular* (PSP) in support of the armed rebellion, with those who support the 1960 alliance between Fidel Castro and the PSP, as well as those exiles who wish to prove that Castro was always a communist, both trying to push back the date of PSP support for the rebels as early as possible. Thus Jorge García Montes, as one may expect from an ex-minister in the Batista government, places the date of the decision to support the rebels well before March 1958.¹⁰⁴ On the other hand, there are those who downplay the relationship and deny the communists any credit for the success of the insurrection, thereby implicitly criticising Castro's later alliance with some senior former PSP leaders. They see the formal November 1958 agreement for joint work in the trade union field as the significant date.¹⁰⁵ The standard Cuban work on the island's working class history, written for the third congress of the Cuban Communist Party, omits crucial but inconvenient details and is vague on this particular point.¹⁰⁶ A more informed approach comes from Angelina Rojas who, in the recent third volume of her history of the communist party, while clearly sympathetic to the PSP, bases her analysis on a detailed study of the public statements of the party tracing the political development of the PSP as it converged with Fidel Castro's *Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio* (M-26-7).¹⁰⁷ The premise of political convergence between the July 26th Movement and the communists gives us a more balanced view than the more common discussion of conspiracies. It is one of the major tasks of this thesis to clear the air on this issue, tracing the political and organisational changes that such convergence implies; this requires a recognition that political opinions change over time under the pressure of events. It is to be hoped that such an approach can help clarify the place of the Cuban revolution in the historiography of Latin American communism.

Scholarly discussion of revolutions frequently start from the work of Theda Skocpol who, from examining state structures, international forces, and class relations arrives at a structuralist analysis that appears to marginalise the role of individual actors and indeed mass movements. She gives greatest importance to considerations of state structure, seeing little importance in the class basis of the revolution.¹⁰⁸ Whatever the

¹⁰⁴ García Montes & Alonso Avila, *Historia del Partido Comunista de Cuba* (1970)

¹⁰⁵ Spalding, *Workers' Struggle* (1974) pp.7-8
Alexander, *Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002) p.161,
Pérez-Stable, *Cuban Revolution* (1999) p.58

¹⁰⁶ PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano* (1985)

¹⁰⁷ Rojas, *Primer Partido Comunista - 3* (2011)

¹⁰⁸ Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (1979)
Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (1994)

merits of this state-oriented, structuralist approach in explaining the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, Alan Knight, seeing more significance in the outcome of revolutions than in the causes, ably demonstrates its inadequacies in relation to Latin America.¹⁰⁹ He thus differentiates between the Bolivian and Mexican revolutions on the one hand, which he sees as "bourgeois", and the Cuban revolution on the other, which he sees as "socialist".

Nevertheless, there does appear to be common agreement that a revolution must involve both mass mobilisation and subsequent structural change.¹¹⁰ This would therefore deny the revolutionary pretensions of Peronism in Argentina. Despite the material improvements many workers derived from the process, Daniel James and James McGuire show that their mass involvement was largely choreographed by the regime along with its supporting trade union bureaucrats and can hardly be construed as self-activity.¹¹¹ Where the Argentine experience does relate to a study of Cuba in the 1950s is the way in which, during the dictatorship, some workers turned to armed struggle when conventional trade union activity failed in the face of murderous repression and a corrupt trade union bureaucracy.¹¹² The failure of the 1969-76 insurgency in Argentina, compared to the success of the insurrectionary phase of the Cuban revolution, cannot merely be put down to structural issues, but must also be a product of the ideas, decisions and actions of the individual and collective actors. James Dunkerley's work on the Bolivian revolution and Alan Knight and Barry Carr's writings on Mexico, as well as underlining the importance of human agency, give considerable attention to the role of organised workers. In the light of Knight's designation of these as "bourgeois" revolutions, it is ironic that so little work has been done on the role of the working class in the "socialist" Cuban revolution during its insurrectionary phase.¹¹³

In 1972, Cuban-American historian Andres Suarez, complained that "Nothing significant exists on the labor movement from 1952 to 1958".¹¹⁴ This still holds true today for general histories of the period, which see the overthrow of the Batista

¹⁰⁹ Knight, *Social Revolution: A Latin American Perspective* (1990)
Knight, *Revisionism and Revolution* (1992)

¹¹⁰ Knight, *Democratic and Revolutionary Traditions in Latin America* (2001)

¹¹¹ McGuire, *Peronism without Perón* (1997)
James, *Resistance and Integration* (1988)

¹¹² Werner & Aguirre, *Insurgencia obrera* (2009)

¹¹³ Dunkerley, *Rebellion in the veins* (1984)
Carr, *El movimiento obrero y la política en México* (1981)
Carr, *Organised labour and the Mexican revolution* (1972)
Knight, *The Working Class and the Mexican Revolution* (1984)

¹¹⁴ Suarez, *Cuban Revolution* (1972) p.13

dictatorship as the work of a few hundred guerrillas, sometimes acting with the support of a middle class urban underground, but making little reference to the activities of labour.¹¹⁵ There is one partial exception to this. Chapter 5 of Hugh Thomas's monumental history of Cuba which, despite Suarez's trenchant criticisms, attempts an overview of the insurrectionary period that includes references to the clandestine workers' organisation; any significance is, however, lost in the overwhelming and sometimes inaccurate detail.¹¹⁶

Robert Whitney has written the definitive account of the revolutionary events of the 1930s, which pays considerable attention to organised labour, while Robin Blackburn, Maurice Zeitlin, Marifeli Perez-Stable and Steve Ludlam, amongst others, have addressed the role of working class politics following the rebel victory.¹¹⁷ However, the only comprehensive overviews of the working class movement during the insurrectionary phase of the Cuban revolution to take any account of the whole range of working class activity are Marcos Winocur's short piece from 1989 and a few pages of Aleida Plasencia Moro's history of the Latin American workers' movement, both of which form an excellent base from which to start a more detailed study.¹¹⁸ In undertaking such a study for this thesis, I believe that I have uncovered sufficient evidence to contest Harold Sims's statement that: "*CTC leaders' acceptance of the existing model of unionism was so pervasive that revolution was wholly unappealing*".¹¹⁹

This thesis is based on a number of propositions that challenge the prevailing historiography of the Cuban revolution. The most important of these orthodoxies is

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- ¹¹⁵ eg. Balfour, *Castro* (2008)
 Bonachea & Valdes, *The Making of a Revolutionary* (1970)
 Cannon, *Revolutionary Cuba* (1981)
 Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (2011)
 Darushenkov, *Cuba, el camino de la revolución* (1979)
 Farber, *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006)
 Goldenberg, *The Cuban Revolution and Latin America* (1965)
 Karol, *Guerrillas in Power* (1970)
 Kling, *Cuba* (1962)
 Pérez Stable, *The Cuban Revolution* (1999)
 Pérez, *Cuba : Between Reform and Revolution* (2006)
 [there are many other books and articles in a similar vein, but these serve to represent the field]
- ¹¹⁶ Thomas, *Cuba, or, the pursuit of freedom* (1998) pp. 798-1034
 Suarez, *Cuban Revolution* (1972) p.22
- ¹¹⁷ Blackburn, *Prologue to the Cuban Revolution* (1963)
 Zeitlin, *Revolutionary Politics and the Cuban working class* (1967)
 Perez-Stable, *Whither the Cuban Working Class?* (1975)
 Blackburn, *Class Forces in the Cuban Revolution* (1980)
 Ludlam, *Cuban Labour at 50: What about the Workers?* (2009)
- ¹¹⁸ Winocur, *¿Dónde estaba la clase obrera cubana cuando la revolución?* (1989) pp.117-133
 Moro, *Historia del movimiento obrero en América latina* (n/d)
- ¹¹⁹ Sims, *Cuban Labor and the Communist Party* (1985) pp.43-59

summarised by Mike Gonzalez when he writes:

*The nature of the guerrilla struggle and its leadership by the 26 July Movement under Castro meant that no mass organisations or organs of workers' defence had grown in the course of the revolutionary war.*¹²⁰

As a result, there is an extensive literature concentrating on the military activities of the rebel army, but little on the clandestine apparatus supporting it.¹²¹ There are two works which do cover the role of the urban underground resistance, the recent work by Julia Sweig, who was granted unprecedented access to the Cuban Council of State archives, and an earlier book by Ramón Bonachea and Marta San Martín, which has become the standard reference on the subject.¹²² However, both of these books deal almost entirely with the actions of the well known leaders of the underground and pay scant attention to the role of working class activists or the mass action they organised.

I argue that organised labour played a pivotal role in the victory of the Cuban insurrection and that Samuel Faber's estimation that the January 1959 general strike was merely a "*well-deserved revolutionary holiday for the Cuban working class rather than an instrument of struggle*" is incorrect.¹²³ In so doing, the common characterisation of some working class action as "spontaneous" can be challenged by demonstrating that these actions were the product of conscious organisation. Historians frequently speak of "spontaneity" when, in reality, they do not know who actually organised the events.

There have been many descriptions of regimes that used coercive force in their attempt to defeat working class resistance to pro-business economic policies, for instance Daniel Guérin writing about Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy or Guillermo O'Donnell on Chile and Argentina under the Generals.¹²⁴ In recent years, some scholars have re-evaluated the nature of popular resistance to dictatorial regimes and two books in particular have shed valuable light on the nature of this resistance: Tom Behan on the politics and practice of the Italian Resistance and Donny Gluckstein's more general

¹²⁰ Gonzalez, *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution* (2004) p.101

¹²¹ eg. Anderson, *Che Guevara: a revolutionary life* (1997)
Barquín López, *Las luchas guerrilleras en Cuba* (1975)
Bonachea & Valdes, *The Making of a Revolutionary* (1970)
Darushenkov, *Cuba, el camino de la revolución* (1979)
Franqui, *Diary of the Cuban Revolution* (1980)
Guevara, *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* (2001)
Padrón & Betancourt, *Batista: últimas días en el poder* (2008)

¹²² Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002)
Bonachea & San Martín, *Cuban Insurrection* (1974)

¹²³ Farber, *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba* (1976) p.202

¹²⁴ Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business* (1973)
O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism* (1973)

analysis of popular response to fascism and imperialism during the second world war.¹²⁵ These authors argue that, in a war situation, the participants often have very varied motives, based on class and other interests, and that people who are apparently on the same side are frequently fighting parallel but different wars. This approach is useful when attempting to characterise the nature of the Cuban insurrection. They both also argue that the transition from resistance to revolution depends on political decisions taken by active participants and is never automatic. In such situations, the activity of organised workers is crucial to the outcome.

Organised Labour to the Fore

It is one of my principal arguments that the masses of the Cuban working class engaged in direct intervention in the insurrectionary phase of the Cuban revolution. They did this not only through traditional industrial action such as strikes, go-slows and demonstrations, but also through sabotage, bombings and armed attacks on the police, as well as through intelligence gathering and logistical support for the rebel army. These previously neglected events made a significant contribution to the process of change in Cuban structural relations. The fact that this is not the widely accepted analysis is all the more peculiar, given the wealth of available evidence from primary sources. However, given the generally unknown nature of this data, a considerable part of this study will involve recounting, in narrative form, a revised history of Cuban organised labour in the 1950s in order to provide a concrete basis for analysis.

Robin Blackburn offers an approach that fits the circumstances of this study:

*In some quarters it is supposed that narrative history has little to offer and is incapable of identifying deep-seated structures of economy, mentality or political life. The present work was undertaken out of the conviction that if they are real and effective such structures will be visible at the level of events. And in the further belief that socio-economic forces and the discourses of ideology are so inherently antagonistic and contradictory that they open up a space of political choice and action which must also be registered if the dynamic of historical development is to be grasped. The attempt to construct a narrative therefore puts conflicting interpretations to the test. It can help to establish the respective weight and significance of the different forces and factors at work.*¹²⁶

The research which underpins this thesis is based on archival printed material, including contemporary newspapers and magazines, as well as interviews with

¹²⁵ Behan, *The Italian Resistance: Fascists, Guerrillas and the Allies* (2009)
Gluckstein, *A People's History of the Second World War* (2012)

¹²⁶ Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (1988) pp.28-29

participants. Ordinary working class people normally leave little trace of their political or social debates and decision making; this is even more problematic for historians investigating a period of dictatorship. Formal minutes of trade union meetings are often a source of decisions taken, if not the process of arriving at those decisions.

Unfortunately for the researcher, no such formal minutes seem to have survived the turmoil of the revolution, if indeed they were even taken, given the corrupt and inefficient nature of the bureaucracy. We therefore have to rely on newspaper reports of the discussions within the bureaucracy. In Cuba, the library of the *Instituto de Historia de Cuba* (IHC - Institute of Cuban History) contains almost complete runs of the principal Havana newspapers of the period. The weekly magazine *Bohemia* was particularly useful as it covered developments in the labour movement in considerable detail. *Bohemia* also had many other articles on the general political situation and organised written debates between leading political figures that give us a deeper understanding of contemporary arguments. In order to verify these reports, they have been cross-checked with other newspapers when they report the same incident and, once allowance has been made for the political bias of the other journals, there is sufficient correlation to make the *Bohemia* accounts believable. The IHC has a complete run of *Diario de la Marina* for the 1950s and the British Library Newspaper Archive has all the editions of *El Mundo* for the period.

The British National Archive at Kew has the diplomatic reports sent to the Foreign Office from Cuba during this period. Given the important role of the British mission to Cuba in promoting British business interests, the diplomatic staff obviously maintained close relationships with both the Batista regime and with local businessmen. Thus, the reports give an insight into the thinking of the ruling elite during the period under investigation as well as providing another source of possible verification through the reports of events sent back to the Foreign Office. Similar verification can be obtained from the US diplomatic correspondence, much of which has been microfilmed and is available on-line; insights from this source have been deployed where relevant.¹²⁷

One might have hoped that there would be some information, perhaps of a statistical nature, in the archives of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), but the available on-line material was disappointing, being mainly concerned with the papers of

¹²⁷ Lester & Yanike, *Confidential U.S. State Department Central Files - Cuba* (1986) available from <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/us-cuba.htm>

two international conferences held in Havana.¹²⁸ Their statistical database (LaborStat) does not publish any data before 1969. Equally, the ILO journal, *International Labour Review*, only had one article on Cuba for the whole of the 1940s and 1950s, although this was one useful commentary on the World Bank *Report on Cuba*.¹²⁹

Politics not only varied over time, there was also considerable regional variation. There has been a tendency in the literature to overemphasise events in Havana and, with the exception of the rebel forces in the Sierra Maestra, to pay scant attention to developments in the provinces. Two books on the rebellion in Matanzas have been published recently, both based on interviews with surviving militants and archival research, which, given the strength of rebel support amongst the textile workers of the province, take considerable account of the working class contribution.¹³⁰ However, despite the efforts of the city historians of Manzanillo and Guantánamo to promote the study of their areas, little else has been published of a regional nature, either nationally or internationally. This is unfortunate, as the strength of popular resistance increased the further away from Havana one looks.

In order to obtain a more complete picture of the Cuban insurgency, local newspapers provide a valuable resource. The municipal library in Guantánamo has a complete set of the local paper *Voz del Pueblo* for the period under investigation. The railway workers of Guantánamo play an important role in the history of working class involvement in the Cuban insurrection and the detailed reports of a local paper have proved to be most useful in uncovering their day to day militant activities. Guantánamo was also the home town of Eusebio Mujal, the general secretary of the Cuban trade union federation, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC)*, who served as Senator for the district. It is interesting to see a different perspective on this controversial figure. The Elvira Cape library in Santiago de Cuba has a large collection of Santiago newspapers and, finally, I am most grateful to Pedro Machado for giving me access to his research using the Matanzas newspapers *Prensa Libre* and *El Imparcial*.¹³¹

¹²⁸ *Sexta Conferencia de los Estados de América Miembros de la Organización Internacional del Trabajo* (1956)

Comisión del Trabajo en las Plantaciones (1953)

[I have had email contact with the ILO Library in Geneva and they confirm that there is no additional relevant archival material]

¹²⁹ Cox, *Some human problems of industrial development* (1952)

Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951)

¹³⁰ García Pérez, *Insurrección y Revolución* (2006)

Chávez Álvarez, *Matanzas de rojo y negro* (2007)

¹³¹ Machado, *El movimiento obrero henequenero* (2011)

As an illustrated journal, *Bohemia* provides hundreds of contemporary photographs, which have proved to be a valuable source as they provide useful information on the numbers of participants in the activities they portray, as well as details of gender and ethnicity frequently ignored in the text. Susan Bloodworth writes:

*The high points of struggle are of particular interest. In periods of 'normality' the divisive ideas in society are the most entrenched. If this is what we focus on, we miss the potential for change. This point is driven home by R.H.B. Kearns' pictorial history of Broken Hill. The book is dominated by photos and graphics of men. But the chapter 'The Miners' stands out with illustrations of women in the struggles.*¹³²

My own interest in the role of working class women was first aroused by a photograph of a demonstration of striking railway workers in Camagüey, which was clearly led by women workers from the offices. This is evident from the photograph, but not from the text of the newspaper in which it appears. However, it is always necessary to remember that photographs can be posed, that they were frequently used for propaganda purposes by both sides and that they would only be printed if they fitted the editorial line of the publisher. A considerable number of photographs have been included in the text of the thesis, where I believe they expand upon the written word and thereby help the reader to a deeper understanding but, of course, such photographs must be viewed with a critical eye.

However useful newspapers might be, they only tell the publicly known events and must perforce be silent on the organisation of successful clandestine activity; the press only normally gives details of failed conspiracies. The underground press gives us more clues in this direction. From 1954, when the *Partido Socialista Popular* (PSP) newspaper *Hoy* was banned, the communist party replaced it with a weekly clandestine paper called *Carta Semanal* (Weekly Newsletter), a complete set of which is held in the IHC library. This paper had a regular column, *Lucha de Masas* (Mass Struggle), which gives details of a large number of industrial disputes. A communist militant would interview workers engaged in industrial action and write a story for the paper. He or she would then return the following week to attempt to sell the paper on the basis of the story, in the hope that some new regular readers would be found. Any inaccuracy undermines this tactic fatally and so this can be considered a reliable source of information. When accounts of such disputes that appeared in *Carta Semanal* were

¹³² Bloodworth, *Militant spirits: The rebel women of Broken Hill* (1998)
Kearns, *Broken Hill: A Pictorial History* (1982)

compared with the less frequent references in the legal press, such as *El Mundo* or *Diario de la Marina*, there is a high level of consistency, when the different political orientations of the sources are taken into account.

In addition to the semi-public *Carta Semanal*, the archives of the *Instituto de Historia de Cuba* contain a large collection of leaflets and pamphlets issued by the principal clandestine workers' organisations and local workers' committees. The papers of the *Comité Nacional de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras y por la Democratización de la CTC* (CNDDO - National Committee for the Defense of Workers' Demands and for the Democratisation of the CTC), deal with the activities of the communist party's front organisation aimed at organised labour. Studying these documents alongside *Carta Semanal* and the papers of PSP, which are also in the IHC archive, enables the changes in party line to be chronologically determined. Reinaldo Suárez Suárez, of the *Universidad de Oriente*, generously gave me access to his personal collection of documents from the period, amongst which were a large numbers of surviving leaflets published by the local branch of the PSP from the Havana suburb of Luyanó. These gave an insight into the day to day interventions amongst industrial workers by communist militants. The IHC collection of papers of *Frente Obrero Nacional* (FON - National Labour Front) and the *Archivo Nacional* (AN - Cuban National Archive in Havana) collection of papers of the *Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio* (M-26-7 - Revolutionary Movement of the 26th July) give a similar insight into the very different agitation and propaganda carried out by the followers of Fidel Castro.

There is, of course, always a question mark over the importance that can reasonably be ascribed to surviving leaflets. What proportion of the total output do they represent? Why did this particular leaflet survive and not others? Was it because they were never handed out? Were they produced by an isolated individual or a flourishing organisation? These questions must be borne in mind when drawing conclusions from leaflets as primary sources but, if treated sensitively and placed in the context of other sources, they provide valuable pointers, part of the trail of evidence. I was most fortunate, therefore, to have been accorded an interview with Alcibíades Poveda Díaz who, in the 1950s, was head of propaganda for the M-26-7 in Santiago de Cuba. He also generously provided access to his personal collection of propaganda material, which gave a view of the implementation of the M-26-7's politics in one of their strongholds and which also contained a number of copies of *Vanguardia Obrera*, the M-26-7's

clandestine newspaper for workers, very few copies of which have survived elsewhere. This was an invaluable opportunity to discuss questions of interpretation of the significance of printed propaganda with one of the principal organisers of this kind of material. He was also kind enough to invite me to meetings of the veterans' study group, *La historia y sus protagonistas*, organised by the staff at the Elvira Cape library in Santiago. The reminiscences of these veterans cast a light on the prevailing atmosphere during the dictatorship.

There was a milieu of workers' militancy in the middle ground between the PSP and the M-26-7, in which both groups operated, sometimes collaborating, but always in competition for members and influence. This took organisational form as local committees, which operated under various names, but came collectively to be known as the *Comités de Unidad Obrera* (Committees of Workers' Unity). The IHC has a collection of papers, mainly Roneoed leaflets, associated with these committees, which show the process of convergence which took place between the labour organisation of the M-26-7, the *Frente Obrero Nacional* (FON) and the PSP and demonstrate that this convergence was more advanced, and involved more practical activity, in the ranks of organised labour than was the case amongst other sectors of the population. This process finally bore fruit in the *Frente Obrero Nacional Unido* (FONU) and the IHC has a collection associated with this organisation. Of particular interest are the papers associated with the two "Workers Congresses in Liberated Territory", about which little has been written elsewhere.

I visited the provincial archives in Manzanillo and Guantánamo where, as well as their own collections of surviving local leaflets and papers from the period, there are many locally written studies, both published and unpublished, which shed light on the local experiences during the insurrection. Aleida Rodríguez Ramírez and Inés Enoa Castillo showed me their university theses on the revolutionary movement in Manzanillo and gave me the benefit of their recollections of the interviews they had conducted. In Guantánamo, there appeared to be no surviving working class militants from the period, but Luis Figueres of the *Casa de la Historia de Guantánamo*, gave me his notes of an interview he had conducted with Níco Torres and we spoke at some length about his discussions with this M-26-7 workers' section leader. José Sánchez Guerra, head of the archives in Guantánamo, provided the unpublished report of the national history commission on the role of the city's labour movement in the rebellion,

informing me that it had been written by Torres himself.¹³³ In Manzanillo, Delio Orozco, city historian and head of the archive, also gave me his notes of an interview he had conducted with Torres. The staff of the Manzanillo archive introduced me to María Victoria Antúnez Salto, who not only gave an interview of her recollections of being an activist in the *Juventud Socialista* (Socialist Youth, the youth wing of the PSP), but also provided copies of testimonials from Wilfred de la O, one of the leaders of the PSP in Manzanillo. I was also introduced to Francisco Monserrat Iser, a veteran PSP *zapatero* from Manzanillo, who gave me an interview and a copy of his unpublished monograph on the working class movement in the city.

In Havana, Angelina Rojas organised interviews with Alfredo Menéndez, an economist at the Ministry of Sugar who had been a member of both the PSP and the M-26-7 who situated political activity in the economic circumstances of the time, as well as with Vicente Pérez, who had been a tobacco worker and communist trade union organiser from Caibarién, who went on to become one of the leaders of the *Frente Obrero Nacional Unido* (FONU - United National Workers' Front, the body uniting the workers' sections of the M-26-7 and the PSP). Vicente Pérez also gave me a copy of the testimonial of Leonal Soto another FONU leader. In Santiago, I met Francis Velázquez Fuentes, who was a member of the M-26-7 in Santiago and later of the rebel army in the Sierra Cristal. He was present at the funeral of Frank País and gave me his written account of the incident. I am also grateful to Jorge Ibarra Guitart for introducing me to his father, Jorge Ibarra Cuesta, who had been president of the University of Oriente students' federation in the mid-1950s. He gave me the benefit of both his recollections of the revolution and his advice as one of Cuba's most respected historians.

There are not many surviving working class militants from the 1950s and so I am grateful to Jana Lipman for her transcript of an interview with the head of the M-26-7 group in the US base at Guantánamo and to Gary Tennant, for notes of his interview with Octavio Louit, a revolutionary railwayman from Guantánamo. In this context, the University of Oriente organised projects in the 1970s and 1980s, which required some final year history students to base their dissertations on interviews with surviving rebel activists. The records of the original interviews are lost, but the manuscripts of the dissertations are still available and these have proved to be an extremely valuable source of information.

¹³³ Comisión Nacional de Historia, *Provincia Guantánamo* (1980)

These primary sources paint a picture of a vibrant clandestine milieu in which working class militants debated, collaborated and competed for influence, but always in the context of organising active opposition to the dictatorship. It is on the basis of this material evidence that I hope to rewrite the history of organised labour in the struggle against Batista.

In order to recount the events considered vital to the analysis of the role of the Cuban working class in the insurrection, the narrative is organised on a chronological basis. Such an approach requires a periodisation in order to be intelligible and, in terms of working class politics and activity, we can divide the Batista years into distinct periods, divided by qualitative changes in the level of state repression. Tony Kapcia, when writing about 50 years of the Cuban revolution, punctuates this account by the various crises affecting Cuban society.¹³⁴ This approach also proved useful as a method of dividing the period leading up to the rebel victory. Of course, it may be argued that the period was one of continual crisis, but within this, there were peaks and troughs which provoked changes and turns in the tactics of both the government and the rebels.

From Batista's coup in March 1952 until the fraudulent elections of November 1954, little changed from the days of his predecessor, President Carlos Prío Socarrás. The fall in the price of sugar caused a crisis in the economy and from the end of 1954 until the end of 1956, there was a concerted effort by the government and the employers to increase productivity by reducing workers' wages and decreasing staffing levels. This was achieved by a combination of collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy and relatively low levels of state repression, the police habitually beating workers with clubs and dousing them with fire hoses, but with very few deaths. The arrival of the *Granma* and the start of the rebel insurgency was a crisis for the regime, whose approach changed in early 1957 as the forces of the state began to confront the armed guerrillas in the mountains. From this point in time, the regime used death squads, routine torture and "disappearances" in an attempt to cow organised resistance to its rule. April 1958 proved to be a crisis point for the rebels as their attempt at a general strike failed disastrously. This crisis caused both the M-26-7 and the PSP to rethink their tactics and their relationship with each other. It also gave increased confidence to the government and, during the summer and autumn of 1958, Batista launched a full-scale military attack on the rebels in their mountain strongholds. The failure to destroy the rebel army

¹³⁴ Kapcia, *Cuba in revolution : a history since the fifties* (2008)

was the regime's final crisis and created a situation where a successful general strike would force the dictator from office. The chapter structure follows this periodisation, with Chapters 1 and 2 forming an introductory background, Chapters 3 and 4 examining the period 1954 to 1956, Chapters 5 and 6 dealing with 1957 to mid 1958 and Chapter 7 the second half of 1958, with Chapter 8 taking the history into the first year of the revolutionary government.

Chapter 1 examines the nature and history of the Cuban working class, its political and industrial organisation, informed by a theoretical discussion of the historical role of the trade union bureaucracy. Chapter 2 then considers the state of the Cuban economy in this period. I argue that, given the overwhelming importance of sugar in the national economy, the falling price on the world market led to an economic crisis. This in turn led the Cuban employers to seek to maintain their profit margins by means of a productivity drive which, given the strength of the trade unions, could only be achieved under an authoritarian regime. This is offered as an explanation for the support from business interests for the 1952 coup and subsequent dictatorship.

Chapter 3 recounts the history of the class struggles of the year 1955 and stresses the importance of these strikes for the relationship between militant workers and the July 26th movement. In particular the battles of that year are analysed in terms of the success or failure of the previously mentioned productivity drive.

Chapter 4 argues that the defeat in most of the 1955 disputes led some militant workers to draw the conclusion that they needed armed support if they were to be able to resist the government and the employers in order to defend their wages and conditions. In particular, the work of a group of experienced trade union militants from Guantánamo in eastern Cuba is studied to show how they started to build a clandestine cell structure in support of their aims. This network had its first real test at the end of 1956 when it was able to organise significant action in support of the *Granma* landing, when Fidel Castro returned from Mexico. The detail of this M-26-7 workers' underground movement has not previously been published.

Chapter 5 examines working class responses to the government's increased use of arbitrary arrest, torture, disappearance and death squads. This campaign of state terror affected both the July 26th Movement and the communists. The political and organisational response of both organisations is outlined and analysed, with particular emphasis on the way in which local activists interpreted their own group's line, and how

this new situation affected their relationship.

Chapter 6 subsequently examines two general strikes, August 1957 and April 1958, the first a success, the second a failure. It analyses the reasons for the different outcomes and shows how these outcomes affected the politics of the PSP and the M-26-7. These two strikes are reassessed in the light of the process of convergence between the two groups.

Chapter 7 continues this theme of convergence and traces its organisational form. In particular it gives details of two workers' congresses in territory under the control of the rebel forces. These congresses show the true level of working class organisation in support of the revolution and refute the arguments of those who say that such support was merely passive. In the process, it becomes clear that the trade union bureaucracy was marginalised by the activity of the rebel army and by grass roots trade union activists.

A revolution does not succeed with the seizure of power, but with its consolidation. In the first year of the new Cuba, organised labour played an important role in that process of consolidation and in the final triumph of the more radical wing of the revolutionary forces. Chapter 8 therefore returns to the theme of trade union bureaucracy, as the disputes within the rebel leadership on the future course of the revolution are fought out inside the trade union federation.

A concluding section draws together the main themes of the thesis and answers the principal research question: "What was the role of the organised working class in the Cuban insurrection of the 1950s?"

Some definitions

In order to avoid confusion it may be helpful to define some of the terms used in this thesis. The obvious first question is about the exact definition of a "worker", "working class" and "organised labour". These are widely debated and will be dealt with fully in Chapter 1.

"Trade union bureaucracy". Trade unions under capitalism have developed a hierarchical full-time apparatus of paid functionaries. These operate at one stage removed from the ordinary rank and file member and have interests of their own which have a tendency to induce a socially conservative attitude. The term "bureaucracy" has

its origins in the manner in which trade union officials frequently display an exaggerated respect for, and adherence to, petty rules and procedures in a manner which would be instantly recognisable to anyone who has had dealings with a North London Borough Council. In some industries, shop stewards and local officers have reduced hours of work and other privileges giving them a material interest in conforming to the rules and practices of the union hierarchy. Where unions have a democratic structure this acts as a counterweight to these pressures. It is not suggested that these pressures absolutely determine the behaviour of trade union officials as there are competing pressures from the membership and individuals have their own political opinions to guide their actions. This will be further discussed in Chapter 1.

"Militancy". This term will be used to indicate a willingness by workers to take industrial action to defend and advance social and economic gains. It implies a belief that the interests of a group of workers or of the working class as a whole are more important than the interests of the employers. It also implies a belief that the right to take industrial action is more important than the duty to obey the law. Above all the term is used to describe the self-activity of workers in struggle.

"Insurgent" "insurrectionary" and "rebel", in terms of organised labour, take the concept of "militancy" a stage further and refer to actions which are aimed at the overthrow of the incumbent regime in a country.

"Labour aristocracy". A term that is the source of much confusion, being applied either to the "Trade union bureaucracy" described above, or to workers in the metropolitan countries who, some Marxists argue, have been won over to supporting their own imperialist ruling class by "crumbs from the table", or to skilled workers who refuse to join in struggle with their less skilled brethren from a form of elitism; such elitism is normally considered a pressure undermining militancy. In this thesis, the term will be used in the last sense, although in nearly every case, it will be used to describe groups of workers of whom little was expected in terms of solidarity, but who overcome their externally perceived elitism to wage a militant struggle.

Chapter 1. Organised Labour in the 1950s

An assessment of the state of the Cuban working class at the start of the period is necessary before examining the changes that occurred during the course of the insurrection, in order to gauge the capacity of workers to defend their interests as a class. This initial assessment starts by recounting the history of the Cuban working class movement since the 1920s and then examining the three major currents within organised labour, the bureaucracy, the nationalists and the communists.

In the early 1950s, the Cuban trade union federation, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC), headed by general secretary Eusebio Mujal, was widely seen as corrupt and undemocratic. It had not always been like this, but the Cold War attack on organised labour, which affected the whole of the Americas, north and south, was particularly successful in Cuba. Following the 1947 CTC congress, the communists had been removed from their previous position of leadership and replaced by a new bureaucracy which seemed more interested in enhancing their own comfortable existence than in defending workers' wages and conditions. However, the actions of the trade union leadership cannot merely be explained by corrupt practices, but must be understood in relation to analysis of their politics, which prevented them from seeing beyond the parameters set by the capitalist system. In the difficult economic circumstances facing post-war Cuba, the CTC leadership were prepared to restrict the demands they put forward on behalf of their members to the employers' "ability to pay". But while the leadership accepted that trade union demands had to be "affordable" and "realistic", growing numbers of Cuban workers did not see it that way. This resulted in tensions within the unions between the rank and file and the bureaucracy, which led militant Cuban workers to build unofficial structures in order to defend their interests.¹³⁵

Nevertheless, trade unions are never monolithic, relying on voluntary officials such as shop stewards and branch secretaries to maintain local organisation. There is therefore nearly always a space in which militants can organise to counteract the domination of the bureaucracy. During the crisis in which Cuba found itself during the 1950s, there was still a lively independent milieu within the labour movement at local level, where the authority of the CTC bureaucracy was contested and which became a

¹³⁵ Spalding, *Organized Labor in Latin America* (1977) pp.227-238

battleground between the various currents competing for influence within the working class.

Historical Background

The organised labour movement in Cuba dates back to the guilds and craft unions of the 19th century, but the first nationwide trade union federation, the *Confederación Nacional Obrera de Cuba* (CNOOC - Cuban National Labour Confederation), was not founded until 1925. In the same year, Gerardo Machado was democratically elected President but his regime became increasingly repressive as the effects of the economic crisis of the late 1920s raised the temperature of the class struggle. Cuba's sugar based economy was already suffering from reductions in US purchases as a result of political pressure from mainland producers, with the result that the Wall Street Crash of 1929 had a particularly devastating effect on the island.¹³⁶

The situation came to a head in 1933 when a strike by Havana bus drivers developed into a general strike which, in conjunction with an army mutiny led by Sergeant Fulgencio Batista brought down the government. It is worth noting that the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), which had progressively gained control of the CNOOC towards the end of the 1920s, tried unsuccessfully to call off the strike in return for minor concessions from the Machado government and this may be seen as confirmation of the politically moderating effect of having control of a trade union apparatus. The government of Ramón Grau San Martín, which took office after the uprising, proved to be neither capable of satisfying the aspirations of the workers, nor being able to bring them under control. The state of dual power that resulted from this contradiction was brought to a close by Batista who, working closely with the US ambassador, used his control of the army to defeat a general strike in 1935. Initially ruling through puppet presidents, Batista imposed a regime described by Hobart Spalding as being both co-optive and repressive, a model which operated by combining a mixture of nationalist demagoguery and minor social reforms with repression of any attempt by workers to exceed the boundaries established by the government.¹³⁷

The CNOOC did not recover from the defeat of the 1935 general strike, while the PCC, itself considerably weakened by police repression, reached an understanding with Batista whereby, in return for legalisation, they worked to broaden his narrow social

¹³⁶ Pollitt, *The Cuban Sugar Economy and the Great Depression* (1984) p.11

¹³⁷ Spalding, *Organized Labor in Latin America* (1977) p.227

base. One of the outcomes of this arrangement was the replacement of the CNOC by a new organisation, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC), which was however, from the outset, a state sponsored trade union. A low level of subscription payment led to dependency on the state, a dependency that was increased by the CTC's approach to defending its members' interests, which mainly depended on the leadership's relationship with the Ministry of Labour, rather than industrial action or collective bargaining.¹³⁸ This relationship left the CTC leadership vulnerable to a change of government.

Batista finally tired of indirect rule and, in 1940, with the support of the communists won the first honest general election in Cuban history. The PCC, now renamed the *Partido Socialista Popular* (PSP), under the influence of Moscow, declared a class truce during the Second World War, which resulted in a wage freeze and no-strike deal. This reduced their credibility amongst the general CTC membership, the majority of whom were more interested in their material conditions than in the war in



Figure 2: Eusebio Mujal, from *Bohemia* (1955)

Europe. Thus, when Batista made a bid for re-election with PSP support in 1944, he was defeated by Grau San Martín and his *Auténtico*¹³⁹ party. The communists' wartime "non-political" approach made them superfluous, while their trade union practice, a combination of undemocratic bureaucratic control and a reliance on government patronage, left them in a weak position. The logic of dependence on a relationship with the state is that, with the arrival of a new government, other factions could offer a closer relationship and thereby gain popular support. The *Comisión Obrera Nacional Auténtica* (CONA - National Labour Commission of the *Auténtico* Party) led by Eusebio Mujal (Figure 2) and linked to the ruling *Auténtico* party, did just this. Throughout the spring of 1947, the *Auténticos* made considerable gains in the sugar and port-workers' unions, while some PSP officials defected to CONA.

There were some armed skirmishes between members of the PSP and the CONA in 1944-5, but matters came to a head at the 5th CTC congress in 1947 when, following

¹³⁸ Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba* (2001) p.169

¹³⁹ The *Partido Auténtico* also known as the Cuban Revolutionary Party-Auténtico or PRC-A was a liberal nationalist party founded in 1933. Its two most prominent leaders had been Presidents Grau San Martín and Prío. By 1952 it had become a by-word for corruption.

a violent dispute over credentials, the Minister of Labour, Carlos Prío, suspended the congress and then used the powers of his ministry to give control of the federation to the CONA, although initially the general secretary was an independent, an official of the electrical workers union called Angel Cofiño. The PSP did not have sufficient active support to prevent the take-over of the CTC and an attempted general strike called by the displaced communist leadership failed, with only the Havana dockers and tram drivers coming out in support. In areas where government intervention proved insufficient to impose a new leadership, gangsters linked to the *Auténticos* used violence to enforce the change of officials. This included the murder of three of the most respected communist workers' leaders, the docker, Aracelio Iglesias, the cigar-roller Miguel Fernández Roig and the sugar worker, Jesús Menéndez (Figure 3).¹⁴⁰ An attempt to form a communist controlled breakaway federation failed when a new law required a union to be affiliated to the official federation before it could sign a collective agreement and this led many previously PSP-led unions to re-enter the *Auténtico* CTC(A) in order to preserve their legal status.¹⁴¹



Figure 3: Aracelio Iglesias & Jesús Menéndez, from *Museum of the Revolution*, Havana

Thereafter Mujal, who quickly succeeded Cofiño as general secretary, used his links to Carlos Prío, who was elected President in 1948, to secure enough economic gains for his members to maintain his position and to prove that his grouping, referred to as *mujalistas*, were at least as effective as the communists they had replaced.¹⁴² Thus, in 1950, a Havana tram strike, led by communists was defeated by police repression, while bank workers were granted their demands on condition that they affiliated to the

¹⁴⁰ "El no.1 de la cordialidad", *Bohemia* (October 24th 1948), quoted in Osa, *En Cuba* (2005) pp.1-5
McGillivray, *Blazing Cane* (2009) p.254

Duarte Hurtado, *La maquina torcedora de tabaco* (1973) p.242

¹⁴¹ Sims, *Cuba* (1992) pp.230-236

¹⁴² U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 2099, (1951) *Labor Developments in Cuba 1950* [References to U.S. Department of State confidential files follow the listing in the most readily available digital source, <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/us-cuba.htm>, from where they may were obtained]

Industrial Federation	Membership
Sugar	550000
Tobacco	98000
Transport	80000
Construction	75000
Commerce	65000
Textiles	50000
Maritime	35000
Food Processing	32000
Petroleum	27000
Railways	25000
Cattle Farming	22000
Flour Processing	20000
Shoes	19000
Medicine	19000
Gastronomy	16800
Metallurgy	16000
Barbers	15000
Drinks	12000
Printing	10000
Furniture	8500
Electric, Gas, Water	7300
Cinema	5200
Insurance	5200
Banking	4000
Shows	4000
Musicians	4000
Salesmen	4000
Telephone	3500
Aviation	2000
Medical sales	2000
Telegraph	600
Total	1237100

Table 1: Membership of the CTC, U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1309 (June 29, 1955)

CTC(A). Reports from the British Ambassador in 1952 are full of criticism of the "endless irresponsible demands of the labour movement", which he blamed on Mujal who "imposed his will on President Prío and secured satisfaction for his every whim, however irresponsible and prejudicial to the long term interests of the country it might be".¹⁴³ The US Embassy made similar complaints; they used more moderate language, but their frustration with the strength of organised labour comes through just as clearly.¹⁴⁴

Cuba in the 1950s had the highest percentage of trade unionised workers in Latin America.¹⁴⁵ The Cuban labour movement was organised in a single confederation, the CTC, which had a membership of over one million workers, out of a total national population of six million. This membership was divided into industrial federations (see Table 1 for the 1955 figures) with the sugar workers federation, the FNTA, accounting for half the membership.

These federations were in turn divided into local unions covering either a geographical area or a single employer depending on the structure of the industry. There were also provincial and city-wide confederations of all of the CTC unions in the area covered. The Cuban trade union movement was highly centralised, with the CTC leadership claiming and exerting authority over the individual federations. By the mid-1950s, this centralised control was exerted with the support of the Ministry of Labour, backed up by the police where necessary. The removal of the communists from office may have suited

¹⁴³ FO 371/97515 - AK1011/1 (1952) *Annual Review of 1952*
FO 371/97516 - AK1015/33 (1952) *Cuban Political Situation* [References to archival material to be found in the British National Archive at Kew will be given starting with the folder reference, where FO 371 refers to records created and inherited by the Foreign Office, General Correspondence from Political and Other Departments from 1906-1966. This is followed by the document reference where AK refers to Cuba related material originating in the American Department of the Foreign Office]

¹⁴⁴ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 170 (1950) *Cuban Labor Developments*

¹⁴⁵ Sims, *Cuba* (1992) p.217

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1309 (June 29, 1955) *Membership of the CTC*

the Cold War foreign policy objectives of the US government, but did little in itself to improve the productivity of Cuban workers. This would require a more structural weakening of their industrial organisation.

Much of the Cold War was fought on the battleground of organised labour and the *mujalista* takeover of the CTC and the subsequent purges can be seen as part of the Cold War anti-communist offensive. The 1950s were a period of great tension in the Cold War and the extent of communist influence in Cuba was a matter of great concern, often verging on paranoia as can be seen by the British embassy's pleasure that the singer Josephine Baker, "*this hot gospeller of racism, peronism and communism*" fell foul of the military intelligence authorities and was deported from the island.¹⁴⁶ The Western powers had a firm public ally in the International Congress of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which had its origins in an anti-communist split from the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) in 1949. The CTC affiliated to the ICTFU at its 6th congress and would go on to organise the anti-communist work of the ICTFU's Latin American section, the *Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores* (ORIT - Interamerican regional organisation of workers), using money provided by Batista, who acted as a "laundry service" for the US State Department.¹⁴⁷ A major figure in this process was Serafino Romualdi, who was employed openly by the AFL and covertly by the CIA.¹⁴⁸ Romualdi worked closely with Mujal and Bernardo Ibañez of the Chilean union federation in the setting up of ORIT. Romualdi explains in his autobiography that the role of ORIT was not just political anti-communism, but also to create:

*a new type of Latin American trade union leader who, abandoning the customary concept of the class struggle, would substitute constructive relations between the workers and the employers.*¹⁴⁹

This may explain why the ICFTU was completely satisfied with the situation in Cuba under Batista, with the British Foreign Office noting the "*refreshing spectacle of an American dictator enjoying the support of ICTFU*".¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ FO371/103377-AK1016/1 (1953) *Communism in Cuba*
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1271 (Feb. 13, 1953) *Joint Weeka No. 7 for State, Army, Navy, and Air Departments from SANA*

¹⁴⁷ Alexander, *A History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002) p.148

Melgar Bao, *El movimiento obrero latinoamericano* (1988) pp.348-352

¹⁴⁸ Kelber, *AFL-CIO's Dark Past* (2004)
Agee, *Inside the Company* (1975) p.620

¹⁴⁹ Romualdi, *Presidents and Peons* (1967) p.5 cited in Melgar Bao, *El movimiento obrero latinoamericano* (1988) p.357 [my translation]

¹⁵⁰ FO371/97516-AK1015/11 (1952) *ORIT*

Mujal's anti-communism should not be seen as coming from any principled political position, indeed he had once been a communist party member, but he always managed to be affiliated with the group who most favoured his career prospects. His rapprochement with Batista should not therefore have been a great surprise. The logic of a trade union whose practice is based on maintaining a good relationship with the state requires a change of allegiance with each new government. This happened very quickly following Batista's coup. Apart from a few isolated strikes in particularly well organised workplaces such as the Matanzas textile industry and some Havana bus routes, there was little response from organised labour. Such working class resistance that did occur was quickly isolated and crushed.¹⁵¹ The official trade unions made a token show of resistance, with Mujal first calling a general strike and then rapidly calling it off before most workers even heard.¹⁵²

The majority of the trade union bureaucracy quickly came to an accommodation with the new regime¹⁵³ and Mujal went on to become one of Batista's most loyal collaborators. In return for this collaboration, the government turned a blind eye to corruption and obliged employers to deduct trade union subscriptions from workers' wages by means of a compulsory check-off, which isolated the CTC leadership from rank and file pressure.¹⁵⁴ This measure was to prove deeply unpopular and, throughout Batista's period in office, the demand for the abolition of the *cuota sindical* appeared on every list of workers' demands. The Havana dockers, despite police intervention, made such an issue of the matter that the employers eventually paid the money over to the CTC without deducting it from their wages.¹⁵⁵ Its abolition was one of the first acts of the revolutionary government on seizing power in 1959.

This therefore is the context in which *mujalismo*, nationalism and communism, the three major tendencies within Cuban organised labour, came to contest the leadership of the movement.

¹⁵¹ PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano II* (1985) p.256

¹⁵² U.S. Department of State Memorandum of Telephone Francisco Aguirre, Serafino Romualdi, John T. Fishburn (March 17th, 1952) *Cuban Labor at the time of the Coup*

¹⁵³ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1552 (March 21, 1952) *Mujal Attack on Communists*

¹⁵⁴ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1073 (March 4, 1954) *Check Off of union dues imposed in sugar industry*

¹⁵⁵ *Carta Semanal* (March 2nd 1955)

Mujalismo

The *mujalistas*, as the leadership of the CTC around Eusebio Mujal have come to be known, were widely seen at the time as being extremely corrupt. This section argues that their corruption was indeed a contributing factor in seeking an explanation for their support of the Batista regime, but that another equally important factor can be found in the nature of the trade union bureaucracy in a capitalist society,

Trade unions, as their name implies, are organised around sectional divisions that reflect the economic structure of capitalism, which in turn institutionalises the divisions between different groups of workers. This allows the government to confront workers sector by sector and thereby avoid a generalised response, which could otherwise overwhelm the forces of the state deployed in support of the employers. As long as the role of a union is seen as defending workers' interests within the capitalist mode of production, with its differential wage structure, these divisions will remain. It would appear impractical in this context to discuss the wages of bank clerks and sugar workers in the same negotiations. The trade union bureaucracy is based on the sectional nature of the unions. It arises from a division of labour between the ordinary workers and those who negotiate on their behalf. This bureaucracy has developed interests of their own, different from the mass of workers they represent, which depend on their ability to mediate between capital and labour. This leads to a more conservative social view, even amongst those who started their trade union career as class conscious militants, with a resulting propensity to vacillate. The actions of full time trade union officials will largely depend on the balance of conflicting forces; employer or state pressure from above and rank and file pressure from below.

One of the common traits of trade unions everywhere is a tendency to avoid mass working class involvement in politics, as any such involvement must raise the question of state power and on whose behalf it is being used. This in turn would bring the economic structure of society into question and threaten the comfortable position of the full time officials, who depend upon having two antagonistic classes to mediate between. This, of course, does not prevent individual trade union leaders pursuing personal political careers, but this is normally kept separate from their industrial functions, maintaining the fiction of a distinction between the "political" and the "economic" that lies at the heart of reformist labour politics.¹⁵⁶ None of this is to say that

¹⁵⁶ Luxembourg, *The Mass Strike* (1905)

individual trade union officials cannot rise above these pressures and act in a militant class-conscious fashion, but for them to do so requires a firm political position, which is normally only possible when they have considerable support and/or pressure from below.

It might be thought that the formation of a national confederation of unions, such as the Cuban CTC, would give the officials a more universalist approach and highlight the common interests of the working class, indeed this has always been the justification for forming such national federations. However, the leaders of a national federation form another bureaucracy which sits on top of the bureaucratic layer that already exists in the federating unions. Rank and file pressure on the national federation leaders is mediated by that intermediate layer. As a result, national federations tend to be more conservative than their component parts. The fact that they are balancing between two social classes allows a certain room for manoeuvre and this partial independence presents the bureaucracy with the possibility of working for their own interests.

In the case of the Cuban republic, this self-interest expressed itself in the form of a level of corruption on a par with the corrupt nature of society as a whole and the CTC general secretary, Eusebio Mujal, was no exception. Not content with his salary of \$280,000 a year, he was susceptible to manipulation by a government which was prepared to use its finances to corruptly advance its policies. Mujal and his associates therefore became an important prop of the dictatorship. The role they played arose from a combination of factors, with the position of the trade union bureaucracy in capitalist society and the corrupt nature of the individuals concerned becoming pressures that were pushing in the same direction. Most writers on the period speak of the evident corruption of the leadership of the CTC, but the idea that this merely reinforced the tendency towards caution and compromise inherent in trade union bureaucracy is normally neglected. Efrén Córdova, who is frequently quoted by other writers, typifies the approach that sees the working class movement through the eyes of the trade union leadership, the employer and the government official when he writes:

*Moreover, unscrupulous labor leaders managed to obtain their illicit gains through dealings relating to the introduction of capital intensive techniques, the relinquishing of make-work practices or the dropping of exaggerated claims. Legitimate rights of workers were seldom compromised ...*¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Córdova, *Castro and the Cuban Labor Movement* (1987) p.55

However, these questions of increased productivity were areas in which militant workers did indeed feel that they had legitimate rights and which the corruption and caution of their official leaders was severely compromising.

Mujal's arguments had a logic and were not incompatible with the economic nationalist politics which dominated working class political discussion, always provided the necessity of operating within the prevailing economic and political system was accepted. Thus he was able to report to a Mayday meeting in 1952 that he called off the March 10th strike against the coup in return for Batista's guaranteeing workers' rights and confirming the existing trade union officials in post.¹⁵⁸ He argued for the trade unions to stay out of politics and claimed that his friendly relationship with Batista was merely pragmatic and was the best way to advance workers' interests, thereby avoiding any discussion of the nature of the regime.¹⁵⁹ He constantly spoke of increasing productivity to help create new jobs and argued that it was true solidarity for those workers in employment to make sacrifices to help create jobs for the unemployed:

*Traiciona a Cuba quien no coopera a fomenta sus riquezas nacionales...
El movimiento obrero está dispuesto a llegar a conclusiones y compromisos que
permitan mayor trabajo y producción.*¹⁶⁰

Jana Lipman provides us with a typical example of the *mujalista* method in her description of his relationship with the trade union organisation in the US base in Guatánamo Bay. In 1950, the trade union for the base workers was set up jointly by the American Federation of Labour (AFL) and the CTC as a moderate, bureaucratic, anti-communist organisation with a no-strike policy, membership of which was confined to permanent staff, thereby excluding the daily-paid contract workers and potentially establishing the permanent employees as a sort of labour aristocracy. The Naval authorities were reluctant to recognise the union at first, but following the establishment of the Batista dictatorship in 1952 and under pressure from the State Department via Romualdi, saw that a moderate organisation which could channel workers' resentments along harmless paths would be to their advantage. Mujal initially threatened to mobilise the whole Cuban labour movement in support of the base workers' union if it were not recognised but, as soon as he obtained this recognition, he

¹⁵⁸ Rojas, *El Mujalismo* (1983) p.92

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1856 (May 5, 1952) *May Day Observed Without Major Incident*

¹⁵⁹ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1837 (May 2, 1952) *Weeka No. 18 for State, Army, Navy, and Air Departments from SANA*

¹⁶⁰ "Anyone who does not co-operate in promoting the prosperity of the nation is a traitor to Cuba. The workers' movement is inclined to reach agreements and compromises which lead to more work and greater production", quoted in Rojas, *El Mujalismo* (1983) pp.99-100 [my translation]

ensured that the union was run by moderate men, confining themselves to occasional nationalistic rhetorical outbursts, while practically achieving little to improve the material conditions of the membership. When even this rhetoric proved too much for the base commander in 1954, Mujal "intervened" and called fraudulent union elections to ensure that his own people organised matters without troubling the employer.¹⁶¹

The CTC in the 1950s did manage to prevent some of the employers' worst excesses, but if a trade union accepts the principles of capitalism then, during an economic crisis, if the employer really cannot afford to pay, then the reformist trade union leader has no choice but to accept a cut in his members' wages. This is of course easier for the trade union bureaucrat to accept as he does not himself have to lose money. As Chapter Two will demonstrate, in the world economic situation of the 1950s, particularly given the falling world price of sugar, Cuban capitalism could neither afford to pay the existing level of wages, nor to maintain manning levels as they were. So, opposition to productivity increases required a revolutionary perspective at odds with the normally cautious attitude of most full-time trade union officials. Such a revolutionary perspective had its deepest roots in Oriente province, particularly in the town of Guantánamo which, ironically, was also Eusebio Mujal's home town. It was in Oriente that Cuban anti-imperialism found its strongest base.

Nationalism

Some sections of the Cuban manufacturing bourgeoisie were attracted to ideas of economic nationalism such as protective tariffs and import substitution, but they were hampered in their campaign for such measures by two main factors. Firstly there was considerable intermingling of commercial and manufacturing capital, which caused a conflict of interest as commercial capital was strongly attached to the link with the United States.¹⁶² Secondly, national manufacturing capital suffered from the same problems of low productivity that faced foreign capital and this would push many Cuban employers into an alliance of self-interest with American capitalism.

At a "Conference for the Advancement of the National Economy" in 1947, Cuban industrialists called for higher productivity and for easier dismissal of unwanted employees, linking this with measures to attract foreign capital. There was also a trend

¹⁶¹ Lipman, *Guantánamo* (2009) pp.75-87

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 413 (Oct. 20, 1954) *Trouble with union at Guantanamo Naval Base*

¹⁶² Ibarra Cuesta, *Prologue to Revolution* (1998) pp.21-22

towards the merger of foreign and national capital in joint ventures, thereby increasing the convergence of interest between the Cuban industrial bourgeoisie and US capitalism as foreign investment increased in the hope of larger profit margins (see Figure 4).¹⁶³ This structural integration led to a lessening of nationalist sentiment amongst Cuban industrialists that was not reflected in working class attitudes.

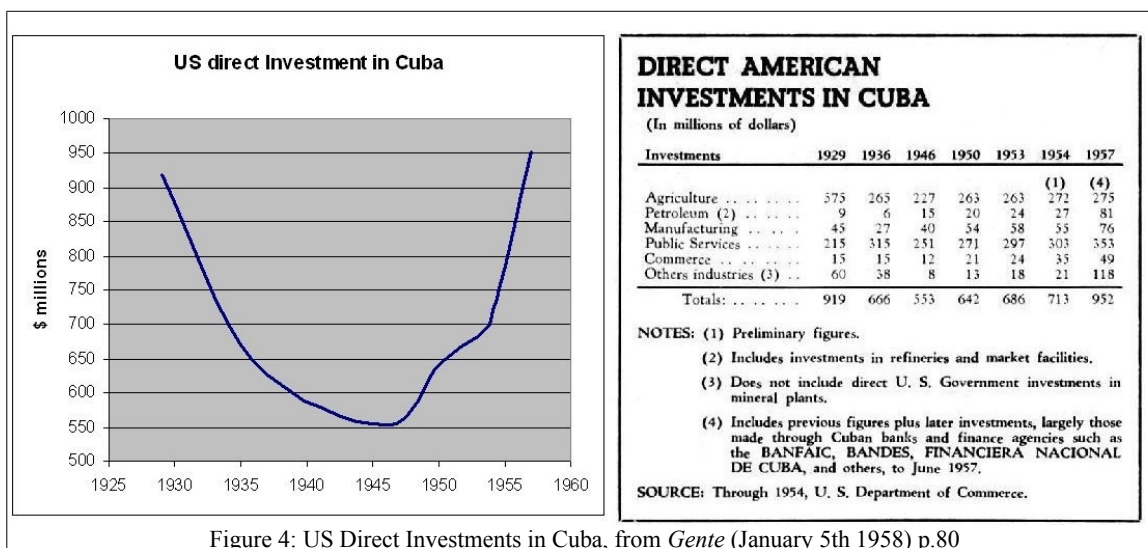


Figure 4: US Direct Investments in Cuba, from *Gente* (January 5th 1958) p.80

While the integration of US and Cuban capital resulted in a more positive view of the United State amongst the elite, the attitudes of working class people, who often bore the brunt of US economic domination, became more hostile. Charles Page comments: "For years, the Cuban workers' bloodiest strikes were against the intransigence of certain American enterprises".¹⁶⁴

This close relationship between US and Cuban capital could inflame nationalist passions when that relationship seemed to the detriment of other classes. An example of this is the *Canal Via Cuba*. Popularly known as the *Canal Rompe-a-Cuba*, this was an American project to build a canal that would cut cross the whole island, from the Bay of Cárdenas in the north to the Bay of Pigs in the south. This elicited considerable opposition from many different sections of the community, but was most unpopular amongst the workers and students.¹⁶⁵ Thus the newly elected president of the university students union, the *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* (FEU - Federation of University Students), José Antonio Echeverría, described it as a direct attack on the island's sovereignty, while the railway workers of Guantánamo organised an opposition meeting jointly with the city's student federation which attracted many of the city's

¹⁶³ Ibarra Cuesta, *Prologue to Revolution* (1998) pp.31-32

¹⁶⁴ Page, *Development of Organized Labor in Cuba* (1952) p.167

¹⁶⁵ Mañach, *El canal y la soberanía* (1955) n.pag.

leading citizens.¹⁶⁶ *Carta Semanal*, the communist party's clandestine newspaper, called it a military project, which was designed to enable the US to deploy its fleet and which would make Cuba a nuclear target in time of war. The paper went on to condemn the proposed canal as an 80 km long port with lower wages and bulk loading of sugar where Cuban employment law would not apply.¹⁶⁷ This last aspect drew the virulent opposition of the dock-workers union, the *Federación de Obreros Marítimos Nacional* (FOMN - National Federation of Maritime Workers), whose conference unanimously opposed the project, comparing it to the Panama Canal.¹⁶⁸ Juan Taquechel (Figure 5), leader of the Santiago dockers, sent a letter to all his fellow workers condemning the project in terms which mixed anti-imperialism, nationalism and anti-militarism with a promise to resist the canal's threat to jobs and conditions.¹⁶⁹ The outcry was such that the project was quickly abandoned, an indication of widespread Cuban anti-imperialist

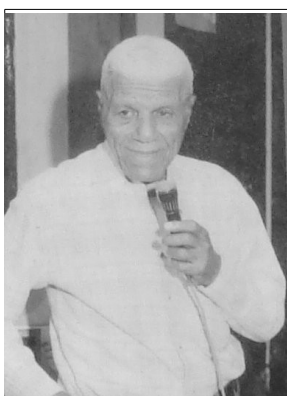


Figure 5:
Juan Taquechel López in
2007, from Taquechel &
Poumier, *Juan Taquechel
López* (2009)

sentiment just below the surface.

Any nationalist movement requires a mass base to advance its policies and, given the island's gross economic inequality, a Cuban nationalist programme had to address the region's social problems if it were to attract support from the impoverished peasants and workers. This gave Cuban nationalism its characteristic nature as a mass popular movement. Such arguments attracted considerable working class support, with the close relationship between the Cuban bourgeoisie and US imperialism leading many workers to see the national question in class terms. However, this did not lead to the posing of socialism as an alternative, merely to seeing the ruling class as "traitors". Indeed there was no organisation in Cuba in the 1950s advocating an openly socialist perspective. While nationalist sentiments dominated Cuban working class politics in the 1950s, there were various forms they could take, ranging from the revolutionary to the reformist. The labour movement was to be one of the battlegrounds within which the competing approaches would seek support.

¹⁶⁶ Fuentes, *La FEU contra el Canal Via-Cuba* (1955) pp.64-5
Voz del Pueblo (January 3rd 1955)

¹⁶⁷ *Carta Semanal* (December 8th 1954)

¹⁶⁸ *Carta Semanal* (December 22nd 1954)

¹⁶⁹ Instituto de Historia de Cuba (IHC) ref:1/8:13/38.1/66A1-A2, *Los portuarios y el canal rompe a Cuba* (December 8th 1955)

In addition to a well structured bureaucratic trade union organisation, there also existed a long tradition of independent action organised unofficially at rank and file level. The informal organisation behind this was still actively operating in the early 1950s, despite the *mujalista* takeover of the official structure. This was particularly true in eastern Cuba where, far from the union head offices in Havana, militants found the need for a greater level of self-help. In so far as the militants who organised this independent activity were politically affiliated, they tended to be associated either with the PSP, or else with the *Auténticos* and the *Ortodoxos*.¹⁷⁰ However, the behaviour of Eusebio Mujal and his associates largely discredited the *Auténticos*, with whom he had previously been affiliated, while the death of Eddie Chibas deprived the *Ortodoxos* of much of their attraction, which was largely based around his charismatic leadership¹⁷¹. In any case, the *Ortodoxos* had little to offer workers faced with an employing class and a government concerned to increase profitability. Therefore the tendencies previously associated with the reformist parties, or at least those who rejected the collaborationist policies of Mujal, were increasingly searching for a militant alternative. The newly formed *Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio* (M-26-7) would gain many of its first working class members from the disillusioned ex-supporters of these reformist organisations whose anti-communist political trajectory prevented them from seeing the PSP as a potential alternative. In order to understand the political development of these local activists, who were used to operating independently of the union bureaucracy, it may be useful to look at the earlier history of one particular group's involvement in the Cuban class struggle.

In 1924, the Havana leadership of the *Hermandad Ferroviaria* (Railway Brotherhood), the main railway trade union, refused to support the railway workers employed by the *Ferrocarril del Norte de Cuba* (North Cuba Railway) in Morón, at that time members of an independent union, who walked out in solidarity with striking Camaquëy sugar workers. Nevertheless, despite the official attitude, the *delegaciones*¹⁷² in Santiago and Guantánamo soon also walked out in support of their colleagues in Morón and put pressure on the national leadership to change its position. This incident

¹⁷⁰ The *Partido Ortodoxo* (Orthodox Party) also known as the *Partido del Pueblo Cubano* (Party of the Cuban People). It was founded in 1947 by Eduardo Chibás. Its main platform was opposition to corruption.

¹⁷¹ Ibarra Guitart, *El fracaso de los moderados* (2000)

¹⁷² *Delegacion*: The *Hermandad Ferroviaria* (Railway Brotherhood) was divided into *delegaciones*, roughly corresponding to a local branch. Each one covered the workers in a particular area working for the same employer. Each one had a number.

is an example of the level of independence existing in the Eastern end of the island where local loyalties were often stronger than formal affiliations to national organisations. Thus in 1943, by which time the CTC was under communist control and had signed a no-strike truce with the first Batista government for the duration of the war, the Guantánamo *delegaciones* launched a strike in an attempt to enforce the payment of a 15% wage increase that had been decreed by the government, but from which they were excluded.¹⁷³ A strike during the Second World War was considered unpatriotic by the PSP, given their priority of maximum support for the Allied war effort following the German attack on the Soviet Union. They denounced the strikers' leaders as "Trotskyites" and for once this often misused accusation was true.¹⁷⁴



Figure 6 - Níco Torres, from *Bohemia* (1959)

In the 1930s, Cuban Trotskyism had its principal base in Guantánamo, where the *Partido Obrero Revolucionario* (POR - Revolutionary Workers' Party)¹⁷⁵ was led by a railwayman, Níco Torres (Figure 6).¹⁷⁶ Torres was an experienced working class militant who started his working life in the sugar industry in the Guantánamo region, but was victimised in 1931 for his involvement in a strike against the Machado dictatorship. In 1934 he joined the POR, along with Gustavo Fraga Jacomino, in time to participate in the party's intervention in the peasant struggles at Realengo 18, in the mountains near Guantánamo.¹⁷⁷ Unemployed and black-listed for the remainder of the 1930s, Torres finally secured employment on the railway and in 1942 was elected *Secretario de Correspondencia* by the members of *Delegación II*, from which position he became one of the acknowledged leaders of the Guantánamo labour movement.¹⁷⁸ By the mid-1950s, he was part of a loose network of militants that operated very effectively in the Guantánamo region. This network would go on to play a significant role in the developing revolutionary resistance to Batista and were to later provide the

¹⁷³ Durán Cremet, *Movimiento obrero en el sector ferroviario* (1988) pp.51-3

¹⁷⁴ Tennant, *Hidden Pearl of the Caribbean* (2000) p.141

¹⁷⁵ This had previously been known as the *Partido Bolshevique Leninista* (PBR)

¹⁷⁶ Tennant, *Dissident Cuban Communism* (1999) pp.194-257 & 302-319

Soler Martínez, *El partido bolchevique leninista* (1999) n.pag.

¹⁷⁷ Sección de historia del partido en Guantánamo, *Reseña histórica de Guantánamo* (1985) pp.98-102

¹⁷⁸ Figueras, *Semblanza de Antonio Torres Chedebaux* (n/d) n.pag

organisational framework and develop the tactics of the July 26th Movement, led by Fidel Castro.

Oleg Darushenkov, basing his opinion on statements made by Castro at the founding conference of the Cuban Communist Party, contends that when Fidel Castro and 135 others attacked the Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba on July 26th 1953, it was with the intention of provoking an armed popular insurrection aimed at overthrowing the dictatorship.¹⁷⁹ Sebastian Balfour, referring to a letter written by Castro to Luis Conte Agüero in December 1953, nuances this by suggesting the intention was to provoke a mutiny of army officers who were members of the *Ortodoxo* party and that this would, it was hoped, provide a backbone to the popular uprising.¹⁸⁰ Whatever the attackers' motivations, the action itself failed disastrously. However, the torture and murder of many of the attackers revolted a large number of ordinary Cubans and won a measure of sympathy for the young rebels. Castro himself was sentenced to 15 years in prison, but was released in May 1955 following an amnesty campaign. However, finding it impossible to operate in Cuba with his life under threat from agents of the regime, he left for Mexico on June 24th.¹⁸¹ He was still technically a member of the *Ortodoxos*, and started organising the *Movimiento Revolucionario de 26 de Julio* (M-26-7) as a faction inside that party, issuing the first manifesto from Mexico on 8th August 1955.¹⁸² This proposed a solution to the country's problems based on agrarian reform, re-establishing workers' rights, profit sharing in industry, rent reduction, social housing, the nationalisation of foreign owned utilities, the establishment of a social security system and measures for the state to aid industrialisation. This was a radical programme, but not one that crossed the bounds of economic nationalism, nor was it explicitly anti-imperialist.

At the founding meeting of the M-26-7 on June 12th 1955, it was agreed to set up a workers' section, or *Sección Obrera*, to organise the movement's activities amongst organised labour, national responsibility for which was given to a sugar worker from

¹⁷⁹ Darushenkov, *Cuba, el camino de la revolución* (1979) pp.68-80
see also Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution* (2011) pp.35-7

¹⁸⁰ Balfour, Castro (2008) pp.36-38
see also Halperin, *Fidel Castro's Road to Power* (1970) pp.69-76

¹⁸¹ "Quieren matar a Fidel" *La Calle* (May 13th 1955) cited in Dávila, *Lucharemos hasta el final* (2011) p.99
Carta Semanal (June 8th 1955)

¹⁸² Castro, *Manifiesto No.1 del 26 de Julio al pueblo de Cuba* (1955) in Díaz Pendás, *Textos sobre Historia de Cuba* (2009) pp.242-254

Camagüey, Luis Bonito.¹⁸³ Thereafter every local group of the M-26-7 that was formed appointed one or more of the leadership team to be responsible for setting up a local *Sección Obrera*. The process was uneven to start with, with greater initial success in the east. The group of Guantánamo railway workers around Níco Torres affiliated in September 1955, while the Santiago *Sección Obrera* was set up by a worker in the soft drinks industry, Ramón Alvarez Martínez who, by the middle of November, persuaded the entire workers' section of the local *Ortodoxo* party to join the M-26-7.¹⁸⁴ There were also early organisational moves in Matanzas province around the textile workers' leader, Julián Alemán.¹⁸⁵ Small and uneven as the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera* was, it had an initial membership with sufficient experience and contacts to be able to recruit from the series of strikes which would break out in 1955. This expansion would force the M-26-7 to consider its relationship with the PSP with whom it would find itself in competition for influence amongst the militant working class.

Communism

The Cuban Communist Party was founded in 1925. In common with the other official communist parties in Latin America, it supported a staged approach to politics which required the establishment of a "Bourgeois-Democratic" regime before a start could be made on the road to socialism.¹⁸⁶ During the early 1930s, the Cuban Communists attempted a sectarian implementation of this policy and refused to work with other organisations that opposed the Machado dictatorship.¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the party increased its influence and membership by its support for workers in the sugar industry from 1930 to 1933 and thereafter played an important role in the Cuban trade union movement.¹⁸⁸ The party leadership was, however, taken by surprise when, in 1933, a stoppage by Havana bus drivers turned into a revolutionary general strike. The party tried to settle the dispute in return for concessions from the government, but when the strike continued despite these attempts at compromise and successfully brought down the Machado government, the party sacrificed much of its credibility.

¹⁸³ Dávila Rodríguez, *Lucharemos hasta el final* (2011) p.133

¹⁸⁴ Poveda Diaz, *Propaganda y revolución en Santiago de Cuba* (2003) p.364
Figuroa, *Un centavo del más humilde de los cubanos* (1975) p.102

¹⁸⁵ García Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution* (1998) p.44-7

¹⁸⁶ Aguilar, *Marxism in Latin America* (1968) p.28

¹⁸⁷ Whitney, *State and revolution in Cuba*, (2001) pp.93-4

¹⁸⁸ Carr, *Mill Occupations and Soviets* (1996) p.130

After the Nazi victory in Germany, the Communist International (Comintern) became increasingly concerned by the growth of fascism and changed course, adopting the policy of calling for *Popular Fronts*, or alliances between the working class and progressive elements in the bourgeoisie. Communist Parties began to speak in terms of national unity against fascism and imperialism, while minimizing the significance of the class struggle.¹⁸⁹ This tendency was exacerbated in Cuba as a result of the influence of the leader of the US Communist Party (CPUSA), Earl Browder who, in December 1943, argued that all social problems could be solved through peaceful compromise. This approach, which became known as Browderism, argued that capitalism and communism could march hand in hand to a future of peaceful collaboration.¹⁹⁰ This provided theoretical justification for the particular interpretation of the popular front policy that was adopted in Cuba, which resulted in an alliance with General Batista during his first government in the 1940s. Memory of this alliance would further reduce the party's credibility amongst Batista's opponents during his second regime in the 50s, despite having repudiated Browderism in 1945 along with the rest of the world communist movement. It has become common to apportion blame for this political approach entirely to Earl Browder, but it should be recalled that Vicente Lombardo Toledano, leader of the CTAL, while not a communist, also spoke of the progressive nature of the Roosevelt administration and advocated alliances with right-wing governments as long as they were anti-Fascist. Fortunately for his historical reputation, Lombardo rejected the logic of the Cold War and denounced US imperialism after the Second World War, while Browder was purged and sank into obscurity.¹⁹¹

This relationship with Batista did, in fact, allow the party to claim credit for some reforms, such as the labour protection clauses in the 1940 constitution, which provided a space within which the CTC could function. It should be said that the PSP was probably the only consistently honest force in Cuban politics during the 1940s, as outlined in James O'Connor's account of the way in which they built the CTC with honesty and hard work.¹⁹² Nevertheless, their approach left the PSP dependent on its relationship with the state and, when Batista lost the election in 1944, the communists were dangerously exposed, particularly given the US pressure to repress communism in the

¹⁸⁹ Farber, *Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006) pp.141-2

¹⁹⁰ PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano II* (1985) p.102

¹⁹¹ Melgar Bao, *El movimiento obrero latinoamericano* (1988) p.334

¹⁹² O'Connor, *The Origins of Socialism in Cuba* (1970) p.179

new atmosphere of the developing Cold War. They were eventually purged from the CTC leadership in 1948.

Therefore, The PSP could not be under any illusions that their previous good relations with Batista could be re-established following his 1952 coup, which they immediately condemned placing the blame on US imperialism.¹⁹³ They called for the setting up of a *Frente Democrático Nacional*, with the aim of uniting the whole opposition in a popular front to resist Batista by legal means. K.S. Karol argues that, unfortunately for them, the Havana leadership of most of the rest of the opposition was more anti-communist than it was anti-Batista and the call fell on deaf ears.¹⁹⁴ This was not always the case in the provinces with, for example, the local newspaper in Santiago de Cuba publishing a joint declaration by all the political parties, including the PSP, condemning the coup.¹⁹⁵ Generally speaking however, such was the disillusion with politics felt by most Cubans, that the only organised social group to actively oppose the coup were the students, a social group with whom the PSP had little influence. Thus, the party failed to see any significance in Fidel Castro's attack on the Moncada barracks.

Having been falsely accused of complicity in the Moncada attack, the PSP was included in the generally increased repression which followed the incident. Their newspaper *Hoy* was closed down, the party was formally banned and the purge of the remaining communists in the CTC was intensified.¹⁹⁶ In a widely circulated *Carta Abierta a los Putschistas y Terroristas*, they argued that individual action, such as the Moncada attack, disorientated the masses and gave the government an excuse for brutal repression¹⁹⁷. There were, however, some signs of disagreement within the party, although mainly confined within the leadership. The following year, a well known member of the National Committee of the PSP, César Vilar, who had once been general secretary of the first national trade union federation, the CNOC, and had been both a National Assembly Representative and a Senator, was expelled for persistently criticising the manner in which the party handled the situation.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹³ *Hoy* (March 11th 1952)

¹⁹⁴ Karol, *Guerrillas in power* (1970) p.129

¹⁹⁵ *Oriente*, (10th March 1952) p.1

¹⁹⁶ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 162 (July 27, 1953) *Closure of Communist Newspaper*
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 165 (July 28, 1953) *Attacks Against Armed Forces in Santiago de Cuba*

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1501 (June 11, 1954) *CTC Anti-Communist Resolution*
PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano* (1985) pp.274-6

¹⁹⁷ Archivo Suárez, *Carta Abierta a los Putschistas y Terroristas* (n/d)

¹⁹⁸ Montoto & Vilar, *Una hija reivindica a su padre* (2011) pp.66-74

Rojas Blaquier, *El Primer Partido Comunista de Cuba 1952 - 1961, tomo 3* (2011) pp.59-74

It is easy with hindsight, given the eventual victory of the M-26-7, to think that the PSP made an avoidable political mistake in criticising the Moncada attack. However, such an attitude does not take into account the real situation at the time. Fidel Castro was not the well known figure he would become and he did not have a track record of success. Indeed there was considerable confusion at the time as to who the actual attackers were. Juan Arauco, writing immediately after the events on behalf of the PSP in the New York *Daily Worker*, seemed to think that ex-president Prío was behind the attack and went on to criticise him for the loss of life and for giving the regime an excuse for repression.¹⁹⁹ This last point is expanded upon in an open letter from the PSP National Committee which lists the measures taken in the aftermath of the attack. Despite the regime being well aware that the PSP were not involved, the attack provided an excuse to arrest and harass communists, to close the party's newspaper, to impose censorship on all the opposition press and to implement wage cuts and redundancies.²⁰⁰ The footnotes of history are littered with forgotten glorious failures and there was no way of knowing that Castro would be able to turn this apparent disaster to his immense political advantage. At the time, as far as militants in the workplaces were concerned, the attack must have seemed irrelevant to their struggle, if not positively dangerous.

By the end of 1953, the communist party had reorganised and adapted to underground operation in the increased repression following the Moncada attack. Its main tactic in 1954 was to appeal, mainly through open letters published in the party's clandestine press, to the leaders of the "bourgeois opposition" for unity against the government.²⁰¹ This initiative reached its most unlikely position when they proposed, at the end of May, a *Frente Democrático Nacional*, which was to include progressive sectors of the bourgeoisie and which would oppose the provisions of the 1951 report from the World Bank, known as the Truslow Plan.²⁰² It strains credulity to think that even progressive sectors of the bourgeoisie would oppose a report which called for increased productivity. However, by July 1954, the regime's proposed elections in the coming November gave the PSP a more concrete slogan: "*Voto negativo*" (Negative Vote), a vote against Batista.²⁰³ The pages of *Carta Semanal* became increasingly

Carta Semanal (August 4th 1954)

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 243 (Sept. 8, 1954) *Communist Party*

¹⁹⁹ "The Recent Insurrection in Cuba", *Daily Worker* (August 4th 1953)

²⁰⁰ "Fascist Terror Grips Cuba", *Daily Worker* (August 10th 1953)

²⁰¹ *Carta Semanal* (May 1st, 22nd 1954)

²⁰² *Carta Semanal* (May 29th 1954)

²⁰³ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 167 (August 11, 1954) *PSP election stand*

dominated by this idea, while militants were urged to set up *Comités de voto negativo* (Committees for a negative vote) in their neighbourhoods as the basis for a future *Union Popular*.²⁰⁴ Those other oppositionists who called for abstention were roundly attacked as playing Batista's game, while the federation of university students, the *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* (FEU), was accused of "petty-bourgeois desperation".²⁰⁵ There were, however, inherent problems with this approach, not least in the naivety displayed in believing that there was the slightest possibility that Batista would allow himself to lose the election; after all, the original coup was staged because he had no chance of winning an election honestly. This time, the only opponent was Ramon Grau San Martín, who undercut the PSP's strategy still further by withdrawing from the contest at the last minute, leaving Batista as the sole candidate, despite which his supporters still fraudulently increased his vote to a scandalous degree. Faced with this farce, the PSP national committee reassessed its position and, recognising that there was little future in electoral politics for the foreseeable future, turned its attention to the working class.²⁰⁶

Under the slogan "*¡Unión y Lucha, Obreros!*" (Workers, Unity and Struggle!), *Carta Semanal* would report in great detail the increased level of industrial disputes which followed the 1954 elections.²⁰⁷ The PSP's new alignment to the working class therefore came at a propitious time and the November 54 decision to set up locally based *Comités de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras* (CDDO - Committees for the Defence of Workers' Demands) created a useful vehicle to intervene during 1955.²⁰⁸ The demands in the manifesto published on the 30th anniversary of the founding of party, under the title of "A Democratic Solution to the Crisis", provide a useful resume of PSP policies at this time:

- Defend workers' and peasants' incomes
- Eliminate the Truslow Plan
- 80 pesos / month for the unemployed
- Agrarian reform that gradually distributes the land to the peasants
- Nationalisation of foreign owned public services
- Control of bank credit in the interests of the country
- Protection of national industry
- Unrestricted sugar harvest

²⁰⁴ *Carta Semanal* (November 3rd 1954)

²⁰⁵ *Carta Semanal* (October 20th 1954)

²⁰⁶ *Carta Semanal* (November 17th 1954)

²⁰⁷ *Carta Semanal* (November 24th 1954)

²⁰⁸ *Carta Semanal* (November 17th 1954) [Sims, *Cuba* (1982) p.236 gives a date of 1948 for the origin of the CDDOs, but he only cites Garcia Montes, *Historia del Partido Comunista* (1970) p.403, which in turn provides no reference. Every other source that gives a date speaks of late 1954 or early 1955.]

- Relations with the USA on the basis of mutual respect and equality
- Diplomatic relations with the socialist countries
- Eliminate racial discrimination
- Democratic rights, independence and peace
- For a National Democratic Front²⁰⁹

The new approach would enable the party to develop a sufficient base in February 1956 to be able to organise a national conference to set up the *Comité Nacional de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras y por la Democratización de la CTC* (CNDDO or National Committee for the Defence of Workers' Demands and for the Democratisation of the CTC).²¹⁰ With their wholehearted adoption of the rhetoric of national unity and a "bread and butter" approach to their work in the trade unions, the Cuban Communist Party did not offer a socialist alternative to challenge the hegemonic nationalist politics. Luis Aguilar argues that, as a result they remained content with tailing other, more militant nationalist currents such as the M-26-7.²¹¹

Thus, while there were considerable differences in the tactics that the PSP and the M-26-7 proposed to implement their programmes, there was no great difference in the basic politics behind these programmes, with a shared concern for economic justice, national independence and an end to corruption. Both groupings also sought to unite the Cuban "people", a nebulous term that included workers, peasant farmers, the unemployed, small businessmen and professionals along with patriotic industrialists. However, while the M-26-7's tactics for the revolutionary overthrow of Batista centred on a general strike, they differed markedly from the PSP in stressing the need to combine that strike with an armed insurrection.²¹² The importance of these tactical differences would become clear as the struggle developed.

Conclusion

There is a contradiction in the nature of trade unions under capitalism. They are both hierarchical and bureaucratic with a top down structure, as well as being democratic, voluntary organisations whose authority comes from the base. However, there is a danger of oversimplification if we solely equate the bureaucratic side of unions with the full-time officials and the democratic side with the rank and file

²⁰⁹ *Carta Semanal* (August 16th 1955)

²¹⁰ *Carta Semanal* (April 4th 1956)

²¹¹ Aguilar, *Marxism in Latin America* (1968) p.28

²¹² García-Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution* (1998) p.72

membership and their local leadership. On the one hand, the full-time apparatus of a trade union depends on the support, or at least acquiescence, of local officials such as secretaries of local unions and workplace representatives and their wider support amongst the general membership. On the other hand, full time officials sometimes respond to pressure from below and lead militant action in defiance of instructions from their hierarchical superiors. Nevertheless, the tendency for the trade union bureaucracy to be cautious and conciliatory in their dealings with management and government is an important factor in all industrial disputes and one that is often neglected by many writers.

The Cuban government appeared to be in a strong position in the 1950s and was recognised as being very pro-business. The legal political opposition was weak, corrupt, incompetent, divided and, in any case, had little interest in defending workers' wages and conditions, being composed of the traditional representatives of business interests. In any case, the *de facto* powers adopted by the government since the coup left little public political space in which the legal opposition could operate. The trade union movement seemed to be firmly under the control a corrupt bureaucracy who, given that their incomes were guaranteed by the compulsory deduction of subscriptions from workers' wages, were more dependent upon their good relations with the Ministry of Labour than on the support of the ordinary union members.

However, the employers and their allies seem to have neglected the tradition of independent militancy. The workplace activists who would be responsible for reviving this tradition provided an alternative pole of attraction within working class politics opposed to the *mujalista* bureaucracy. This milieu was not politically homogeneous with the PSP and the M-26-7 competing for influence. However, both groups were pushing in the same direction as the competition for influence and membership would be won by the group which showed that its strategy was best able to advance the workers' cause.

When a regime becomes involved in industrial relations, the class struggle becomes overtly political and so the government's close relationship with the United States, which still dominated the economy, would give credence to nationalist politics amongst militant workers. Having seen the manner in which the Cuban trade unions fell under the domination of a corrupt clique and having argued that this corruption exacerbated the normal trend of a trade union bureaucracy to reach an accommodation with the existing regime, there was clearly a political base, in the form a radical popular

nationalism, for internal opposition to this state of affairs within the labour movement. Thus, the labour movement was divided, on one side was the pro-government *mujalista* bureaucracy and, on the other hand, the anti-government forces within organised labour, principally represented by the Communists and the 26th July Movement, who were themselves in competition for political influence.

This chapter started by questioning whether the Cuban working class of the 1950s was capable of acting as a "class for itself" and intervening in events to assert its own interests. The Cold War offensive appeared to have been successful in Cuba. It not only removed the communists and their allies from their controlling position in the CTC, but also replaced them with new leaders who were far more interested in their own interests than those of their members. This new bureaucracy seemed firmly entrenched, having subverted the internal democratic structures of the unions and marginalised the internal opposition. Thus, at first sight it would appear that those who doubt the political importance of the working class at this juncture might seem justified.

Nevertheless, by the middle of the decade, there were signs of life amongst militant workers who were unhappy with this state of affairs. The PSP still had a base and, having recovered some confidence following the defeats of the late 1940s, was embarking on a new approach, based on the CDDOs, which was aimed at reconnecting with organised labour. There were also other, less formal networks of militants who were working to overcome the stranglehold of the bureaucracy and the M-26-7 was starting to seem an attractive home for these activists.

The tension between bureaucracy and democracy becomes more obvious at times of heightened class struggle and, by the middle of 1954, the scene was set for industrial confrontation. The fall in the price of sugar and the consequent crisis of profitability made the question of raising the level of productivity crucial for the Cuban employing class. In order to achieve this, they had to reduce staffing levels and wage rates. This did not seem to present too great a problem for the employers.

However, though workers may tolerate an undemocratic and corrupt leadership of their unions when their livelihoods are not in jeopardy, they can be much less tolerant when they see their wages and working conditions in jeopardy. The next chapter examines the increasing difficulties faced by the Cuban economy, along with the employers' determination to maintain their profit margins at their employees' expense. This seemed to call for a more robust response than the CTC leadership was prepared to

organise. Thus the question of working class action can be reformulated to ask whether rank and file militants were able to overcome the dead hand of the bureaucracy and organise their fellow workers to fight for their interests.

Chapter 2. A Crisis of Productivity

Dye & Sicotte recently made the assertion that "*Most leading scholars of the Cuban Revolution outwardly reject the proposition that economic conditions contributed to the downfall of Batista or the rise of Fidel Castro*".²¹³ The assumption that economic conditions were not a significant factor in developing mass opposition to the Batista regime has resulted in a neglect of the class struggle in period leading up to its overthrow, while the argument that Cuba was prosperous compared to other Latin American countries leads to the revolution being seen as an anomaly. This chapter will look at the Cuban economy with particular reference to the way in which workers were affected by changes in economic conditions. This is important in assessing the role of organised labour in the Cuban revolution, for if changes in the political economy of the island resulted in a deterioration of the working and living conditions of workers, then this will have a bearing on the form and degree of their involvement in the revolutionary process.

The whole Cuban economy was dependent on sugar which, in the 1950s, provided 80% of the island's exports. There was some other industry, but the tobacco industry was the only other major exporter, with the result that it was commonly said that "*sin azúcar, no hay país*" (without sugar, there is no nation).²¹⁴ There was a large civil service, but this required a buoyant sugar market to finance it. This situation left the country highly dependent on the international price of sugar. As a result of this overwhelming importance of sugar, any deterioration in the price or the amount that could be sold in export had a serious knock on effect on the rest of the economy. It is therefore logical to set any investigation of the Cuban economy in the context of Cuba's position in the international sugar market and to ask whether the price fluctuations of the 1950s were serious enough to merit the reference to an economic crisis. Yet, if there were indeed severe problems, why do many authors refer to Cuba being "prosperous" during this period?²¹⁵

The real question is how one defines "prosperity". It can be seen either as an environment in which business can make large profits, or alternatively as system which

²¹³ Dye & Sicotte, *The U.S. Sugar Program and the Cuban Revolution* (2004) p.674

²¹⁴ Santamaria García, *Sin azúcar no hay país* (2001)
Curry-Machado, *The Transnational Counterpoint of Sugar and Nation in Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (2009)

²¹⁵ eg Baklanoff, *Cuba on the Eve of the Socialist Transition* (1998) p.262
Smith & Llorens, *Renaissance and Decay* (1998) p.247-259
Cuba Transition Project, *Socio-Economic Conditions in Pre-Castro Cuba* (2008)

provides a high standard of living for the whole society, not just for the middle and upper classes. In Cuba in the 1950s, the productivity measures which business interests wished to implement in an attempt to maintain their profit margins were achieved by redundancies and by increasing workloads for the same or lower wages. An approach which only considers GDP and similar broad indicators, gives a distorted view. As Jorge Ibarra Cuesta demonstrates, an increase in per capita income, when combined with higher unemployment and wage cuts for many of those in work, results in an increase in inequality.²¹⁶ The struggle over the surplus produced by labour frequently takes ideological form in a discussion of the need for productivity increases, which can be portrayed by the employers as contributing to the common good. This argument was rejected by militant sections of organised labour, who had a tradition of fighting to defend what they saw as their rights irrespective of the economic problems faced by their employers. This led many employers in Cuba at this time to feel that they needed an authoritarian regime to defeat working class resistance to measures which would increase productivity. This chapter examines, therefore, the link between the fall in the price of sugar, the resulting crisis of profitability and the employers' need to increase productivity which, it is argued, provides an explanation for the 1952 military coup and the support given to the resulting dictatorship by business interests.

Economic Dependence and the Power of Sugar

Following US intervention in the Cuban War of Independence, known to the North Americans as the "Spanish-American War", the island received its formal independence in 1902 on condition that the new constitution contained a clause, known as the "Platt Amendment" after the US Senator who proposed it, which gave the United States the unilateral right to intervene in Cuban affairs. This constitutional arrangement was accompanied by a Treaty of Reciprocity, which structured economic relations between the two countries to the advantage of the United States. In these circumstances, American capital quickly came to dominate the Cuban economy in general and the sugar industry in particular. Even if legally independent, the island was effectively a US colony whose economy was overwhelmingly dominated by the production of sugar.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Ibarra Cuesta, *Prologue to Revolution* (1998) pp.5-20

²¹⁷ eg Farber, *Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006) pp.71-2

Pérez, *Cuba : Between Reform and Revolution* (2006) pp.189-228

Pérez Stable, *The Cuban Revolution* (1999) pp.15-17

Cannon, *Revolutionary Cuba* (1981) pp.37-43

Ibarra Guitart, *El Tratado anglo-cubano de 1905* (2003) pp.50-59

Between 1895 and 1925, world production of sugar rose from 1 million to 25 million tons and, by the end of this period, Cuba, with annual harvests of around 5 million tons, was the most important single producer.²¹⁸ In the second decade of the 20th century, a speculative boom known as the "Dance of the Millions", largely financed by loans from US banks, collapsed and most of the Cuban sugar industry passed into American ownership when these banks foreclosed.²¹⁹ US capital's control of the sugar industry throughout the early years of the republic ensured its domination of the wider economy.²²⁰ Even though the Platt Amendment was abrogated in 1934, following an uprising against the dictatorial regime of Gerardo Machado, a new reciprocity treaty was signed the same year, which Louis Pérez describes as even less favourable than the first.²²¹ However, over the next 20 years the nature of the relationship between the two countries changed as US capital moved away from direct ownership of sugar production into indirect control through banking, as well as making considerable profit from the control of utility companies such as electricity and telephones. Nevertheless, by 1958, US capital still owned 42% of the productive capacity of the Cuban sugar industry.²²² Arnaldo Silva calculates that, between 1948 and 1955, 637 million dollars in profits from sugar alone was repatriated to the United States, which represents an important loss of capital that could otherwise have been used for internal economic development in Cuba.²²³

Robin Blackburn shows that, as the pattern of US involvement in the economy changed, there was a parallel process of integration of the Cuban bourgeoisie into US capitalism.²²⁴ The reciprocity treaty of 1934 gave preferential access for Cuban sugar to the US market while, in return, US manufactured products were subject to lower import duty, thereby impeding the development of a Cuban manufacturing industry. Jorge Ibarra Cuesta writes of the dual nature of the Cuban non-sugar bourgeoisie, who tended to spread their interests between commercial and manufacturing undertakings. This contradiction prevented them adopting a unified class position on such matters as import/export or industrial development because, as importers, they opposed local production of anything that might compete with their imports while, as manufacturers,

²¹⁸ Pollitt, *Cuban Sugar Economy and the Great Depression* (1984) p.3

²¹⁹ Pollitt, *Cuban Sugar Economy and the Great Depression* (1984) p.22

²²⁰ Pollitt, *Rise and Fall of the Cuban Sugar Economy* (2004) pp.320-321

²²¹ Pérez, *Cuba* (1988) p.280

²²² Pino Santos, *El asalto a Cuba por la oligarquía financiera yanqui* (1973) p.198

²²³ Silva Leon, *Cuba y el mercado internacional azucarero* (1975) p.139

²²⁴ Blackburn, *Prologue to Revolution* (1963) p.60-61

they wanted protection for their own locally produced products. This prevented the adoption of a united position on protective tariffs, as each manufacturer argued for his individual advantage, while having little material interest in supporting the claims of manufacturers of other products. Only the sugar-bourgeoisie had a consistent position, which was opposed to Cuban national industrialisation because they wanted the maximum trade in their sugar. Agricultural employers also gained an advantage from a high level of unemployment to ensure sufficient available cheap labour at harvest time, giving them another reason to oppose industrialisation. Thus, the most consistent business influence on government economic policy was in a direction which maintained Cuban dependence on sugar and against any industrial development or diversification.²²⁵

Much of the rest of the economy was linked to sugar production, more or less directly. The major export traffic through the ports was sugar, while Zanetti and Garcia have demonstrated the dominant role that sugar played in the development of the railway system.²²⁶ Important sectors of manufacturing industry, such as rum and soft drinks, also required the availability of sugar as a raw material. The other major traditional industry, tobacco, had declined considerably, with cigar exports down from 256 million per year in 1906 to only 21 million in 1949, while cigarette imports had risen from 1.7 million packets in 1935 to 15.6 million in 1949.²²⁷ The major utilities, telephones and electricity, were monopolies owned by US capital. The large profits that these companies made in return for a poor service and how little of those profits were reinvested in Cuba had long been subject to much criticism in the national press.²²⁸ There were small textile and shoe industries, but these could not even supply internal needs. The position of the textile industry was made worse by the 1954 commercial treaty with Japan which allowed the Japanese to export cheap clothing to Cuba in return for a guaranteed import of Cuban sugar.²²⁹ This deal provides another clear example of the dominant political influence of the sugar oligarchy. The non-sugar manufacturing bourgeoisie was organised in the *Asociación Nacional de Industriales de Cuba* (ANIC - National Association of Cuban Industrialists) but it did not have sufficient political weight to push the government towards protectionist tariffs and industrial development

²²⁵ Ibarra Cuesta, *Prologue to Revolution* (1998) pp.21-26

²²⁶ Zanetti & García, *Caminos para azúcar* (1987)

²²⁷ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) pp.856-864

²²⁸ eg. "El pueblo de Cuba debe estar vigilante" *Bohemia* (November 27th 1955) p.3

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1290 (Dec. 18, 1950) *Cuban labor leader suggests nationalization of American-owned Electric and Telephone Companies*

²²⁹ Machado, *El movimiento obrero henequenero* (2011) n.pag

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1586 (June 30, 1954) *Labor difficulties at textile plant*

policies, which were opposed by the *Asociación Nacional de Hacendados de Cuba* (ANHC - National Association of Cuban Landowners) representing the interests of the sugar oligarchy. A further complication, which reduced the ANIC's ability to promote industrial development was the presence in its leadership of local representatives of US business interests, most notably Colgate-Palmolive and Firestone tyres, which had factories on the island. The parent companies of these US-owned manufacturers had profitable links with the Cuban sugar industry. Nor was the Cuban non-sugar bourgeoisie itself independent of US capital, however they were linked more closely with US finance capital, while the sugar oligarchy was linked to US exporters of consumer goods. Whilst these factors meant that the manufacturing sector was unsuccessful in its attempts to pressurise the government to adopt an effective industrial development policy, the ANIC and the ANHC were united in a belief that salary reductions were essential to make Cuban exports competitive.²³⁰ Another source of disagreement between the two associations was the corruption endemic in Cuban political and economic life, as the ANIC members were largely excluded from this source of income and therefore protested loudly.²³¹

A significant proportion of Cubans whose employment was not directly or indirectly involved with sugar worked in the top-heavy state bureaucracy, the service sector or tourism. All three sectors were riddled with corruption, particularly in the case of tourism, which Enrique Cirules's *El imperio de La Habana* shows was heavily influenced by the US Mafia.²³² Nearly all the government intervention aimed at developing the economy was directed to unproductive capital products, mainly in Havana, which did little or nothing to aid diversification.

With this high level of dependence on sugar, any change in either the price received for the sugar crop, or the amount that could be sold, had a huge effect on the island's economy. Therefore, when the political threat of a reduction in the amount purchased by the USA coincided with a heavy fall in the price on the world market, the Cuban economy as a whole faced a crisis.

²³⁰ Marques Dolz & Fierro, *The Non-sugar Industrial Bourgeoisie and Industrialization in Cuba* (1995) pp.65-74

Ameringer, *The Cuban Democratic Experience* (2000) p.136

²³¹ Marques Dolz & Fierro, *The Non-sugar Industrial Bourgeoisie and Industrialization in Cuba* (1995) p.66

²³² Cirules, *El imperio de La Habana* (1993)

The International Sugar Market

While Cuba originally produced almost exclusively for US consumption, the growth of internal production of both beet and cane sugar in the USA caused the American government to increase import tariffs, thereby causing the Cuban share of the US market to decline as the price of Cuban sugar rose for US consumers.²³³ This in turn led Cuba to look elsewhere and, by the 1950s, about half of the Cuban harvest was aimed at the rest of the world, so that the income from the "world market" developed a considerable significance in the island's economic affairs.²³⁴ The heightened international tension at the time of the Korean War led to stockpiling of sugar, then considered an important strategic foodstuff, leading to considerable price inflation so that, by December 1951, the world price of sugar was 4.84 ¢ a pound, climbing to a brief high of 5.42 ¢ the following March.²³⁵ This high price encouraged a vast increase in worldwide production, with new areas being turned over to both cane and beet farming but, as there was not a comparable increase in consumption, the resulting crisis of overproduction led, within a year, to a collapse in the price to a mere 3.55 ¢ a pound.²³⁶ At this time Cuba was producing 18% of the world total and so the collapse in the market was disastrous for the Cuban economy. Cuban sugar farmers played their part in the general international scramble to grow more sugar and the 1952 *zafra* (sugar harvest) was the biggest in the island's history at over 7 million tons, compared to the previous record of 5.5 million tons the year before. Unfortunately for the Cuban producers however, of that 7 million tons, they were only able to sell 4.8 million, producing a general economic crisis for the whole island.²³⁷

In an attempt to cope with the immediate problems of the sugar industry, the government purchased 1.75 million tons of the 1952 *zafra* to be kept in reserve and off the open market, thus hoping to use Cuba's dominant position in the market to stabilise the price. Compensation was paid to the owners for this measure, which resulted in a balance of payments deficit of 82.6 million dollars.²³⁸ The Cuban unilateral cutback in production was implemented by decree number 78, which ruled that the 1953 harvest would be restricted to 5 million tons by shortening the length of time in which cane

²³³ Gerber, *United States Sugar Quota Program* (1976) pp.103-111

²³⁴ Pérez Stable, *Cuban Revolution* (1999) pp.14-16

²³⁵ Cepero Bonilla, *Política azucarera* (1963) p.321

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 45 (1951) *Review of the 1951 Sugar Crop*

²³⁶ Cepero Bonilla, *Política azucarera* (1963) p.347

²³⁷ Cepero Bonilla, *Política azucarera* (1963) pp.329-330

²³⁸ Cepero Bonilla, *Política azucarera* (1963) p.339

could be cut.²³⁹ The tactic of restricting the length of the sugar harvest was designed to increase profits for the owners of the sugar companies at the expense of their employees. The sugar workers were only paid during the actual cane cutting period and therefore, if the harvest were of shorter duration, the wage bill would be reduced. Should the restriction be successful in raising or at least stabilising the price of sugar, this would maintain or increase the employers' income. Critics of the strategy of restricting production were clear at the time that only the sugar bourgeoisie could benefit from the policy of restriction and it was widely portrayed as being against the national interest.²⁴⁰ This illustrates the contradictions inherent in "economic nationalist" politics when the nation is divided into classes with divergent interests and, in consequence, there is no single "national interest".

As many of its critics predicted, this unilateral action was a complete failure, as other producing countries took advantage of Cuba's voluntary restriction to increase their output and the price continued to fall. The total national income from sugar fell from \$655.5 million in 1952 to \$404.9 million in 1953, while the total wage bill for the industry fell from \$411.5 million to \$253.9 million.²⁴¹ Raúl Cepero Bonilla maintains that speculation, insider trading and corruption were rampant, with those who ran the *Instituto Cubano de Estabilización de Azúcar* (ICEA - Cuban Institute of Sugar Stabilisation) enriching themselves scandalously.²⁴² Moreover, the reduction in national sugar production was implemented by issuing production quotas to Cuban sugar companies, who were then able to trade these to their own immediate enrichment, while their employees faced redundancy when their employer sold their quota. An example of this is the 1956 protest at the closure of *central La Vizcaya* in Matanzas when its quota went to *La Chaparra* in Oriente.²⁴³ The UK government also profited from the unusually low price of sugar to end sugar rationing at home and buy a million extra tons from Cuba at less than 3¢ a pound.

Following the failure of Cuba's unilateral action to arrest the decline in the world price of sugar, an attempt was made to organise an international agreement to regulate the market. This approach had been tried before in the 1930s with the Chadbourne Plan, which had not been particularly successful because other countries, not members of the

²³⁹ Chávez Álvarez, *Matanzas de rojo y negro* (2007) p.16

²⁴⁰ "Azúcar", *Bohemia* (January 23rd 1955) n.pag.

²⁴¹ Guerra, *La industria azucarera cubana* (1957) n.pag.

²⁴² Cepero Bonilla, *Política azucarera* (1963) pp.310-312

²⁴³ Chávez Álvarez, *Matanzas de rojo y negro* (2007) pp.33-34

scheme, simply increased their production and undermined the scheme.²⁴⁴ In 1953 however, 44 governments were present at the negotiations and the Cuban government, one of the most enthusiastic backers of the approach, had greater hopes that the sugar price might be stabilised.

The chaotic situation in the world sugar market prompted the intervention of the United Nations. In April 1953, the UN invited 78 countries to send representatives to an International Sugar Conference in London, to take place in July of that year, with the intention of negotiating an International Sugar Agreement. The idea behind the agreement was to stabilise the price of sugar by allocating quotas to the different producing countries which would, in the words of the agreement, "regulate the world sugar market and reach an equilibrium between supply and demand that would allow the price to be maintained between the limits of 3.25 and 4.35 ¢ per pound".²⁴⁵ The Cuban quota was designed to allow a *zafra* of 5 million tons. In the event of the price falling below 3.25¢, quotas would be progressively cut by a maximum of 20%, at which point no further action was envisaged. The final agreement was signed in August by only 38 of the 44 participating countries, while the rest of the sugar producing world, particularly Peru, Indonesia, Brazil, Formosa and East Germany, was not bound by the treaty.²⁴⁶ Not signing the agreement and increasing production was only an option for smaller producers whose economies were not so dependent on sugar. This may have been short-sighted, but it represented an opportunity for growers in these smaller producing countries to gain an income they had not previously enjoyed. If Cuba were to have tried this approach, such was its importance in the world market that its withdrawal would have destroyed the agreement.

The partial nature of the International Sugar Agreement was to be its undoing, as those countries which did not sign the agreement could increase their production as much as they wished, while importing countries who were signatories to the agreement were not obliged to buy exclusively from other member states. Furthermore, the agreement only restricted production in exporting countries, but did not restrict internal production in participating importing countries; a particularly important loophole for European sugar beet producers. There were also two other important sugar regulation schemes, the Commonwealth Preference scheme and the United States Sugar quota

²⁴⁴ Pino Santos, *Los años 50* (2008) p.141

²⁴⁵ *Convenio Internacional del Azucar*, Havana: Gaceta Oficial No. 7645, 11 January 1954

²⁴⁶ Swerling, *The International Sugar Agreement of 1953* (1954) pp.845-849

scheme. The latter accounted for about half the Cuban production and would have an important effect on the situation as US growers, eager to increase their own share of the domestic market, succeeded in their campaign to reduce the amount of sugar purchased from Cuba. This exacerbated the problem caused by the reduction in income from the rest of the world market. The Commonwealth scheme, which was designed to develop sugar production in the British Empire and which guaranteed an annual 2.5 million tons to Britain's colonies and ex-colonies, was an additional complication because it further reduced the potential market for Cuba.²⁴⁷ Thus, Cuba faced an unfortunate conjuncture, as falling prices due to overproduction coincided with a reduction in the American and British markets, as preference was given to internal US and British Empire production. Meanwhile some smaller producing countries took short term advantage of the London Sugar Agreement's attempt to reduce the amount of sugar on the market and undermined the agreement by increasing their own production.

These defects were obvious from the beginning as the price dropped to 3.14¢ in November 1953, thus triggering a 15% drop in quotas as soon as the agreement came into force. The price continued to fall and in May 1954 another 5% cut in quotas was decreed by the International Sugar Council, which had been set up under the agreement to manage the quota system. This intervention had little effect as, in June, the price fell to 3.05¢. The maximum cut in quota now having been reached, the agreement was powerless to act further, although the council did suggest a further voluntary cut.²⁴⁸

The failure of the London Sugar Agreement to achieve its objective of stabilising the world market sugar price between 3.25 ¢ and 4.35 ¢ per pound was to have serious political repercussions in Cuba, where opponents of the regime, like the economist Oscar Pino Santos who wrote for the journal *Carteles*, criticised the agreement as an unpatriotic betrayal of Cuban national interests, which he predicted was doomed to failure in any case.²⁴⁹ It is difficult to see how anything that the government might have done would have stopped the fall in the price of sugar, but the fact that they tried and failed left them open to criticism. However, the critics' recommended approach, which amounted to little more than aggressively trying to sell more sugar on an unregulated market, risked a further catastrophic fall in the world price which could have bankrupted the country. Nevertheless, the fact that the weight of the measures adopted fell most

²⁴⁷ Swerling, *The International Sugar Agreement of 1953* (1954), p.841

²⁴⁸ Silva Leon, *Cuba y el mercado internacional azucarero* (1975) pp.123-143

²⁴⁹ *Carteles* (January 16th 1955) pp.46-49 & 97, reprinted in Pino-Santos, *Los años 50* (2008) pp.135-140

heavily on the workers was to produce a strong reaction within the trade unions; a reaction exacerbated by changes in United States sugar purchasing policy.

The United States had never been part of the International Sugar Market, having sufficient supplies from its own internal sources and from its client states such as Cuba and the Philippines. During the first decades of the 20th century, Cuba supplied almost the entire US market and only then sold any excess on the world market, but the Jones-Costigan Act, passed by the US Congress in May 1934, imposed a system of quotas that were not mutually negotiated but decided unilaterally by the US Secretary of Agriculture.²⁵⁰ This reduced the Cuban share of the US market from 50% down to 30% and by the early 1950s the United States was only buying about half of the Cuban sugar crop. The US quota system was further complicated by the fact that, as well as its commercial function, it had a political dimension.²⁵¹ So, in May 1955, following an aggressive campaign led by Senator Allan Elender, the US Senate passed a new "Sugar Law" which reduced Cuba's previously held right to 96% of any increase in US consumption down to 29.5%. This, according to Oscar Pino-Santos writing at the time, cost Cuba nearly 100,000 tons.²⁵² This additional threat to the Cuban sugar production, which occurred despite a visit to Washington by a united delegation of Cuban employers and workers' leaders of all factions, served to increase anti-imperialist feeling amongst sugar workers.²⁵³

These feelings reinforced working class nationalist politics and gave added credence to ideas of economic nationalism as a solution to poverty and insecurity. This, in turn, further undermined the credibility of the London Sugar Agreement, which was popularly seen as being a surrender to foreign interests.²⁵⁴ It has been common since the 1960s to assume that opposition to foreign ownership was directed entirely against the United States. However, it should be remembered that European capital held a significant minority stake in the Cuban economy and this was just as bitterly resented when it appeared to threaten the perceived Cuban national interest.

²⁵⁰ Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture* (1976) pp.243-4

²⁵¹ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1452 (June 2, 1954) *Campaign against modification of U.S. Sugar Act*

²⁵² Pino Santos, *La cuota azucarera de Cuba en Estados Unidos* (1955) pp.46-48
Dye & Sicotte, *The U.S. Sugar Program and the Cuban Revolution* (2004) pp.673-704

²⁵³ "Obreros", *Bohemia* (May 14th 1955) n.pag.;

Cueto, *La delegación obrera cubana en Washington* (1955) n.pag.

²⁵⁴ Casteñeda, *Azúcar: causa común de todo un pueblo* (1955) n.pag.

As the failure of the London Sugar Agreement to prevent the continuing decline in sugar prices was becoming increasingly obvious, the government's inability to think of an alternative strategy further reduced its standing. Peru and Indonesia refused to join, Brazil and Formosa were unsatisfied with their quota and left, while many importers were never included. Moreover, the British Commonwealth received privileges which, given that London was the home of the agreement, served to further weaken the agreement's credibility. By early 1955, the price of sugar was ¢3.15 per pound, which was 10 points lower than the agreed minimum. Cuba appeared to be taking the majority of the restriction with a 30% reduction compared to the production levels of 1952, the impact of which would be much worse if the US quota were to be cut further as now seemed likely. The London Sugar Agreement appears from these figures to be working against Cuba's interests, but remaining a party to the agreement maintained a level of profitability for the employers, even if this was at the expense of working class employment and living standards. Yet living standards for agricultural workers were already appalling.²⁵⁵ The figures contained in the 1957 report by a Cuban Jesuit association, the *Agrupación Católica Universitaria*, are graphic, 64% of rural dwellers with no proper sanitation, 43% illiteracy, 91% undernourished, to give but a few examples.²⁵⁶ Cuba's sugar workers therefore had little to lose by resisting and, while hardship does not necessarily generate militancy, when combined with a sense of injustice, there is potential for industrial action.

These problems had already been foreseen by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) in 1951 when, following the request of the Cuban government for a loan, an American economist, Francis Truslow, was commissioned to produce a report on the state of the Cuban economy.

Productivity and Politics

The Truslow Report started from the position that international competition gave rise to the need to reduce sugar production costs and the recognition that mechanisation must inevitably displace some labour. The problem was summed up as:

- *employees strongly resist mechanisation and cost-cutting methods*
- *the discharge of employees for legitimate cause [is] made difficult or impossible*
- *higher wages, coupled with opposition to methods for increasing productivity,*

²⁵⁵ Riveron Hernandez, *Tiempo Muerto* (1955) n.pag.

²⁵⁶ Agrupación Católica Universitaria, *Encuentra de Trabajadores Rurales, 1956-57* (Reprinted: 1972)

endanger the competitive position of the basic sugar industry itself.²⁵⁷

The opposition to productivity measures was rooted in the island's high levels of unemployment and underemployment, which explains the tenacity with which Cuban workers defended their jobs and the social clauses in the constitution that helped them to do so. The report recognises that the high level of unemployment deeply affected the consciousness of those in work. As Louis Pérez has argued, job security was always an important concern of unionised workers.²⁵⁸ Truslow sums up the situation as follows:

*In Cuba it is usually easier, quicker and cheaper to divorce a wife than to fire a worker. Under prevailing conditions of chronic seasonal unemployment, it may also be easier to find a new wife than to find a new job.*²⁵⁹

The report argued that increased productivity would attract investment, promote diversification and thereby produce jobs, although it does recognise that the workers' reluctance to co-operate was based on their doubt that the money saved would be invested productively.²⁶⁰ Underneath the call for greater co-operation between management and labour lay the concrete proposal to make dismissal of employees simpler, faster and cheaper.²⁶¹ In the particular case of the sugar industry, the report called for mechanisation, not of the planting and cultivating, but of the harvesting, which was the most labour intensive part of production and which would result in the redundancy of a very large number of workers.²⁶² The employers wished to extend the mechanisation of the sugar industry beyond that recommended by Truslow to include modernisation of the refining process in order to process the cane faster. This would not only save time and thereby reduce wages in the sugar refineries, it would also put pressure on the cane farmers, the *colonos*, to increase the pace of work of their harvesting crews to supply the same amount of cane in a shorter time. The sugar workers called this process *intensivismo*, replying with the demand that they be paid for *superproducción*; this expression meant that they wished to be paid the same total amount as they had been before the new machinery arrived.²⁶³ Clearly this was not what the employers had in mind when they considered investing in new machinery.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁷ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) p.10

²⁵⁸ Pérez, *Cuba* (2006) pp.224-230

²⁵⁹ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) p.60

²⁶⁰ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) p.372

²⁶¹ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) p.388

²⁶² Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) p.98

²⁶³ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 193 (1950) *Labor Developments in Cuba - Second Quarter 1950*

²⁶⁴ Menéndez, *Interview with Alfredo Menéndez* (2009)

The Truslow report was not merely concerned with the production of sugar, but also examined transport, which was an equally important part of the export procedure. The railway industry was close to bankruptcy and port labour was considered to be in need of reform to reduce its potential to disrupt loading. The report bemoans:

*the strategic position occupied by men who load and unload ships, in view of the big investment tied up in ships and merchandise and the ease with which shipping companies can be subjected to important losses by sudden stoppages or delays.*²⁶⁵

This "strategic position" has been used by dockers everywhere to enhance their wages, improve their working conditions and maintain their manning levels. However, most employers would agree with Truslow in feeling that this obliged them to employ more staff than was strictly necessary, thereby reducing business efficiency. In particular, the report identified the main problem as the refusal to bulk load sugar. The universal nature of maritime productivity disputes is underlined by the contacts established at this time between the dock-workers of Caibarién in northern Cuba, who were fighting bulk-loading and the workers in the port of Liverpool in England, who were in dispute over attempts to introduce the fork-lift truck.²⁶⁶ The report further believed that wage levels were excessive, a factor which also exacerbated the precarious financial state of the railway industry:

*With labor still making wage demands, it is believed that in many cases they have reached the limit that employers will tolerate.*²⁶⁷

It should be noted that there is little mention of the question of inflation in the discussion of wage levels. In part this is as a result of the lack of reliable data. The US Embassy, in noting that it was "*impossible to do more than conjecture as to the actual expenditure of the working classes*", concludes from their own observations that there was a considerable increase in the cost of living as a result of food price inflation.²⁶⁸ This would have been another factor in stiffening labour resistance to wage cuts.

Thus, increased productivity was to be achieved by mechanisation and longer hours of work, both policies which would reduce the need for the existing number of workers in circumstances of a chronically high level of unemployment. To this was added the

²⁶⁵ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) p.309

²⁶⁶ Perez, *Interview with Vicente Perez* (2008)

²⁶⁷ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) p.136

²⁶⁸ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 193 (1950) *Labor Developments in Cuba - Second Quarter 1950*

proposal for a cut or at least a freeze in wages. There was therefore little prospect of workers voting for a party which intended to implement the Truslow report.

In this context, the outlook for the 1952 general election looked unfavourable to the employers. Of the three candidates for President, Roberto Agramonte for the *Ortodoxos*, a recently founded anti-corruption party, was widely expected to beat rivals Fulgencio Batista, who had headed an earlier regime in the 1930s, and Carlos Hevia for the *Auténticos*, the current ruling party. The *Ortodoxos* were not a workers' party, but were relying on working class votes for their expected victory. The main plank of their election platform was opposition to corruption allied to a vaguely expressed economic nationalism which, while it did not go as far as outright anti-imperialism, called for recovery of national wealth and promised to implement measures of social equality. Such was the popular revulsion with the level of corruption of the *Auténtico* administration that it was widely expected that the *Ortodoxos* were going to win the election handsomely, while Batista seemed to be heading for a crushing defeat. The *Ortodoxos* displayed no interest in implementing the Truslow report and the report's concerns with productivity received no mention in their public statements. The *Ortodoxos* platform spoke of the "*cubanisation*" of the economy, "*emancipating Cuba from foreign imperialism*", nationalisation of foreign owned service industries and monopolies and redistribution of arable land.²⁶⁹ Carlos Alzugaray, in his recent study of US diplomatic correspondence, argues that this platform worried US business interests and their allies amongst the Cuban bourgeoisie.²⁷⁰ Eduardo Chibas, leader of the *Ortodoxos* until his suicide in 1951, would certainly have worried the First National Bank of Boston who led a syndicate that loaned the Cuban Government \$200,000,000 to build such projects as the tunnel under Havana Bay.²⁷¹ He made it quite clear that, if he was elected, he would not repay the loan.²⁷²

When Batista and his associates in the armed forces staged a coup on the 10th March 1952, it was quickly welcomed by the United States. There was, in fact, remarkably little internal opposition to the army takeover, such was the cynicism with

²⁶⁹ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 185 (August 2nd, 1951) *Policies and Prospects of Senator Eduardo Chibas*

²⁷⁰ Alzugaray, *Crónica de un fracaso imperial* (2008) p.72-78
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1994, (March 30, 1951) *Weeka No. 13 for State, Army, Navy, and Air Departments from SANA; Eduardo Chibas lack of balance*

²⁷¹ Ameringer, *The Cuban Democrtic Experience* (2000) p.107

²⁷² U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1575 (Jan. 26, 1951) *Weeka No. 4 for State, Army, Navy, and Air Departments from SANA; Eduardo Chibas*

politicians in general that developed over the first fifty years of the republic. The only social group to react strongly was the students.²⁷³ The ousted President went quietly, partly for fear that an *Ortodoxo* election victory might have investigated and punished his corruption. There was then an unseemly scramble by the majority of professional politicians to reach an accommodation with the *de facto* government in the hope of retaining their lucrative privileges.²⁷⁴ The literature contains a variety of explanations for the success of the coup, with different writers emphasising their preferred option. Thus Marifeli Pérez-Stable speaks of the restoration of order, Louis Pérez graphically describes the corruption and inefficiency of the *Auténticos*, Salvador Morales Pérez points to the desire of US economic interests to restructure the Cuban economy, while Morris Morley stresses the Cold War anti-communism of the US government.²⁷⁵ These factors all played a part in the coup and it is not the intention to propose a monocausal explanation. Nevertheless, given the lack of importance accorded elsewhere to the support given by business interests for the specifically anti-labour role played by the dictatorship, that particular aspect will be stressed here, not with the intention of downplaying other explanations, but of redressing the balance and bringing forward a neglected aspect of the history of the period.

The coup was indeed generally welcomed by capitalist interests, as it was felt that Batista would be more business-friendly than the alternatives. Within ten days of the coup, the major business associations had visited the presidential palace to offer their support: The *Asociación de Hacendados*, the *Asociación de Bancos de Cuba*, the *Asociación Nacional de Comisionistas del Comercio Exterior*, the *Socios de la Bolsa de la Habana*, the *Asociación de Industriales de Cuba* and the *Cámara de Comercio*.²⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the main business daily paper, *Diario de la Marina*, contrasted the situation under the previous government where the "balance inclined monstrously toward the labour unions", with the statements of the new government, which were described as "serene and reasonable".²⁷⁷

In May 1952, the British Ambassador wrote:

²⁷³ Poveda Díaz, *Propaganda y revolución en Santiago de Cuba* (2003) pp.17-48

²⁷⁴ Osa, *En Cuba III, 1952-4* (2008) pp.33-37

²⁷⁵ Pérez Stable, *The Cuban Revolution* (1999) pp.52-53

Pérez, *Cuba : between reform and revolution* (1988) pp.288-289

Morales Pérez, *La dictadura de Batista* (2009) n.pag.

Morley, *The U.S. Imperial State in Cuba* (1982) p.143-145

²⁷⁶ *Havana Post* (March 14th, 15th, 19th 1952)

El Mundo (March 14th, 15th, 19th 1952)

²⁷⁷ quoted in *Havana Post* (March 16th 1952)

*I am more and more convinced that the basic reason for the Armed Forces having staged the revolution was their utter disgust at the growing and unrestrained power of Labour*²⁷⁸

later that year adding that:

*The business community, industry and commerce have all welcomed the new regime... If the coup d'état had to come, no better leader could in their view have been found and no more opportune moment chosen.*²⁷⁹

The US Ambassador equally noted that businessmen were amongst the new regime's most enthusiastic supporters.²⁸⁰ The role of the state as ultimate guarantor of the interests of the ruling class was to be clearly demonstrated in the period under Batista's rule.

Conclusion

Attempting to influence the international market price of sugar was an important policy objective for the Cuban government, while the sheer size of the country's production seemed to offer the possibility of success in manipulating the market to maintain price levels. The government's attempts to achieve this, first by a unilateral cut in exports and then through participation in the International Sugar Agreement ended in failure as the price of sugar continued to fall. This fall made the question of labour productivity more urgent. The level of profitability was a serious problem for nearly all sectors of the Cuban economy by the middle of the 20th century, even without the fall in the world price of sugar. The Truslow report, identified the principal challenge facing the Cuban economy as low labour productivity and the task of resolving this problem would be made very much more difficult if the still-dominant sugar industry ceased to be profitable. To achieve this general increase in productivity, wages would have to fall and manning levels would have to be cut, which in turn would require state action. The report foresaw that that a dictatorship might result from this conflict of class interest.²⁸¹ Given the fear of most workers that the productivity measures proposed would be detrimental to their income and employment prospects, many employers thought that an authoritarian regime would be necessary to enforce the Truslow Report's proposals which, at least in the short term, could only result in a considerable increase in the already chronic level of unemployment.

²⁷⁸ FO 371/97516/7 - AK1015/33 (1952) *Cuban Political Situation*

²⁷⁹ FO 371/97516 - AK1015/18 (1952) *Cuba under General Batista*

²⁸⁰ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1561 (March 24, 1952) *Recognition*

²⁸¹ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) p.359

One of the reasons for the success of the coup of March 10th 1952 was support from the business community for a regime which could reduce the ability of Cuban workers to defend their wages and working conditions. Such a regime could push the balance of national income in the favour of the employers. The new government sought to reduce opposition from organised labour by incorporating and corrupting the trade union bureaucracy, which would operate with the support of the Ministry of Labour and the police if necessary. Should that be unsuccessful, the regime had the army at its disposal to enforce its priorities. The year 1955 would put bring this conflict to the fore.

Chapter 3. The Employers' Offensive

The year 1955 was a crucial turning point in the developing history of the Cuban Revolution. Up to this point, the Batista government had not tried very hard to enforce its productivity agenda and the *mujalista* bureaucracy had generally maintained its control of the union structures, with few examples of serious industrial action. This all changed during 1955, with important disputes in several key industries. These would have long term effects on the relationship between organised labour and the regime, as well as profoundly changing the balance of forces within the working class movement.

At the end of 1954, the Batista government had two pressing industrial problems on its agenda. The falling price of sugar meant that the employers in that industry were demanding wage and job cuts. They were particularly insistent as their demands for such cuts the previous year had been largely ignored pending the elections.²⁸² Additionally, financial problems in the US owned *Ferrocarriles Consolidados* (FFCC Consolidados), the railway company that operated the network in the eastern end of the island, meant that its owners also wished to cut their wage costs and staff numbers.²⁸³ The government's confrontations with the workers in these two powerful industrial sectors, as well as some other important groups of workers, made 1955 an important turning point in the history of labour mobilisation in Cuba.

The task of examining the class struggles of the year 1955 in detail has not been done elsewhere in the literature. Angelina Rojas, Marcos Winocur and Lazaro Torres Hernandez have provided general overviews. Rojas has relied upon the Havana newspaper *Diario de la Marina*, Winocur relies upon *Bohemia* and Torres has conducted a series of interviews with protagonists, most notably the strike leader Conrado Béquer.²⁸⁴ These short pieces serve as an introduction to the events of the year, but do not go into sufficient detail to assist with an analysis of the long-term effects of the struggles on Cuban politics. The outcomes of these disputes were different in each industry and the political trajectory of the leading protagonists was correspondingly different. This chapter argues that the degree to which each group of workers were

²⁸² FO 371/108990 - AK1015/3 (1954) - *Internal situation in Cuba*

²⁸³ Del Cueto "Las condiciones de Trabajo hacen insostenible a los Consolidados" - *Bohemia* (November 21st) 1954

²⁸⁴ Rojas-Blaquier, *1955* (1998)

Winocur, *¿Dónde estaba la clase obrera cubana cuando la revolución?* (1989) pp.117-133

Torres Hernández, *Rebelión proletaria desde el "golpe" al Granma* (1976) pp.88-93

successful or not in their aims helped determine whether the politics of the PSP or the M-26-7 would come to dominate the anti-Batista opposition in different industries and regions. This analysis requires a more detailed study of the objectives, aims and outcomes of each different situation. There have been several interesting studies of the events of this period in individual regions, such as the unpublished account of the sugar workers' strike in Ciego de Avila in December 1955 that has been prepared by researchers in the provincial archive, or in single industries, such as Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro García's work on the railway industry.²⁸⁵ Such accounts where, as in these cases, their sources are substantiated,²⁸⁶ provide much useful detail but, because they are restricted in their scope, lack an overview of the whole situation. This chapter will attempt to strike a balance between detail and generalisation.

Most other authors gloss over the events of this important year entirely, perhaps, like Bonachea and San Martín, mentioning in passing the relationship between the students and the sugar workers, but little else.²⁸⁷ Thus Robert Alexander in his *History of Organized Labor in Cuba* accords the sugar and bank workers' strikes less than a full page, while Jorge Garcia Montes and Antonio Alonso, in their history of the Cuban communist party, only allow the 1955 sugar workers' strike three paragraphs.²⁸⁸ If the majority of the historiography ignores widespread industrial action and apparently sees little connection with the developing revolutionary situation when the information is readily available in the daily press, it is hardly surprising that there should have been little research into the more obscure details of the later clandestine labour movement. In order to support the assertion that the sugar and bank strikes, as well as many others from 1955 which normally receive even less attention, were crucial to understanding the history of the Cuban insurrection, it is necessary to document the labour struggles in that year, both to rescue the story of the events from obscurity and to provide evidence for the contention that the working class played a significant role in the insurrectionary period of the Cuban revolution.

If the role of workers in the Cuban insurrection has been overlooked, the role of women workers has disappeared completely from view. An examination of

²⁸⁵ Pérez Garcia et al., *Invierno Caliente* (2008)

Zanetti & García, *Caminos para azúcar* (1987) pp.368-74

²⁸⁶ Pérez's work is well referenced to sources in the provincial archives in Ciego de Avila. Oscar Zanetti has done me the courtesy of personally discussing his work with me.

²⁸⁷ Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection* (1974) p.56-8

²⁸⁸ Alexander, *History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002) pp.156-7

García-Montes & Alonso Avila, *Historia del Partido Comunista de Cuba* (1970) pp.476-7

contemporary sources, particularly photographs, demonstrates the importance of women both as workers themselves and as family members of workers in struggle. This chapter also examines the contribution made by women railway office workers, bank workers and shop assistants, as well as the solidarity provided by the wives and families of sugar and port workers. Two examples of this which are better documented, the office workers of Camagüey and the sugar workers of Delicias y Chaparra, serve as an illustration of wider women's involvement. Subsequent chapters highlight the same phenomenon in many other sectors.

The chapter starts by examining the troubles of the Cuban transport industry, continues with the bank workers' dispute, then tries to establish a balance sheet of the single enterprise strikes in industries such as brewing and textiles, before looking at the sugar workers strike, including their developing relationship with the country's students. The account of the events of 1955 can be given sector by sector with only minimal disruption of the chronological sequence, because the government was careful to avoid a generalised confrontation and so engineered disputes in one industry at a time. From this account, it emerges that the failure of these strikes at the hands of a repressive state and a corrupt trade union bureaucracy led a significant group of militant class-conscious workers to seek a different approach to the defence of their economic interests. In order to present a rounded picture, the chapter will also address the apparent success of the port and tobacco workers in resisting the employers' offensive when, all around, their compatriots were suffering defeat after defeat. Reflecting on why the employers' productivity offensive was successful in some industries and not in others is key to understanding the later political development of different industrial sectors within the labour movement.

Batista planned his attack on working conditions carefully. He had reached an accommodation with the CTC but could not move too quickly because, if he undermined Mujal's base, that accommodation would be useless. Moreover, Mujal was accustomed to influencing government policy to a greater extent than would have suited Batista and the new dictator took a little time to subordinate Mujal to his project. We shall see how Mujal's relationship with the government changed over time and how he became increasingly identified with the regime. Having established a good relationship with the CTC leadership, Batista adopted an approach that would be reprised 30 years later by the Thatcher government in Britain using an approach that became known as

the "Ridley Plan": an attempt to restore profitability by defeating workers sector by sector, making sure that the field of battle is always chosen by the government and that any chance of generalised and united industrial action is avoided.²⁸⁹ Once the government had decided that the time was right to confront a particular group of workers, they acted with considerable brutality when this was required to overcome resistance. Nevertheless, they did not always win and particularities of each sector will be examined along with the political conclusions each group of workers drew from their victory or defeat.

Previous chapters have argued that the Cuban employers felt the need for a productivity drive and that the trade union bureaucracy and the government were essential to their plans. This chapter examines the reaction of the workers to this productivity offensive so that we may assess the degree to which it succeeded. To do so, it takes a narrative approach to the events, record of which has been largely buried in the archives.

Public Transport

The first significant confrontation between the Batista government and organised labour came in the transport industry. The Cuban railways were suffering from a particularly severe crisis as a result of years of underinvestment, while transport workers were well organised and had maintained a significant level of independence, particularly in Oriente province at the eastern end of the island. The disputes in the transport industry in 1955 signify the first real defeat suffered by organised workers at the hands of the government and their employers. The government managed the conflict so that the railway workers were not given reason to go on strike until after the sugar harvest was in, thereby denying them the opportunity to make common cause with the sugar workers, with whom they had traditional relationships of solidarity. The railway companies also had substantial holdings in the bus industry, which had led to links between the the workers' organisations in both industries. It also meant that cost-saving measures would be applied on the buses as well the railway. It was in the bus industry that the new *de facto* government made its first attack on the labour movement, relatively quickly after the coup.

²⁸⁹ *The Economist* (27th May 1978) pp. 21-23

In July 1952, with no warning, one of Havana's two bus companies was placed under military control, the leader of the union, Marco Hirigoyen, was arrested and 600 out of the company's 6000 drivers were dismissed.²⁹⁰ This served the double purpose of removing one of Mujal's internal enemies in the CTC and cowing one of the most militant groups of workers in the capital, thereby reinforcing Mujal's sense that his future lay with the regime.²⁹¹ This decisive action by the government also served to impress upon both the business community and foreign observers that Batista was serious in his intention to confront organised labour.²⁹² The British Ambassador, wrote that *Autobuses Modernos*, one of the two bus operating companies in Havana, "*had from the point of view of graft, rank inefficiency and financial loss become a crying scandal*". He went on to "*report this incident as an example of what can be achieved in Cuba by a strong man who is fearless of intimidation and is bent on cleansing public services of gangster and surplus elements. It is to be hoped that similar action, if required, will be taken at the appropriate moment to place the United Railways on an economic basis*".²⁹³

The United Railways to which he refers, called *Ferrocarriles Unidos (FFCC Unidos)* in Cuba, was the railway company that operated services in the western half of the island. It had a majority of British shareholders and was practically bankrupt. The British owners had been trying to extract themselves and their remaining capital from the company for some time, a fact which gave the British Embassy another reason to look kindly on the new Batista government:

*the existence of a strong Government in Cuba greatly improves the chances of a settlement of the United Railways claim, which has been made more difficult by the attitude of organised labour in Cuba.*²⁹⁴

Railways had developed early in Cuba, initially as a freight network that linked the sites of sugar production to ports on the coast, while a passenger network uniting the major centres of population on the island was a later development. This association between sugar and railways, described in detail by Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro García, was reflected in a history of solidarity between railway workers, dockers and sugar

²⁹⁰ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 15 (July 3, 1952) *Army occupied Autobuses Modernos and arrested Marco A. Hirigoyen*

²⁹¹ U.S. Embassy Havana, Memorandum (May 15, 1952) *Opposition to Batista Administration*

²⁹² U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 60 (July 11, 1952) *Further Report on Autobuses Modernos Situation and Its Effects on the CTC*

²⁹³ FO 371/97516 - AK1015/33 (1952) - *Political Situation in Cuba*

²⁹⁴ FO 371/97516/7 - AK1015/9 (1952) *General Batista's Coup d'Etat*

workers that dates back to the beginning of the 20th century.²⁹⁵ Dagmary Durán describes how the main national trade union, the *Hermandad Ferroviaria* (Railway Brotherhood) had a socially conservative leadership that had close ties to the American Federation of Labour (AFL).²⁹⁶ This conservative attitude was, however, far from universal within the organisation and the local organisations, known as *delegaciones*, could be remarkably militant, particularly in the east of the island. By the middle of the century, the network was divided between two companies, the British-owned *Ferrocarriles Unidos* which operated in the west of the country and the US-owned *Ferrocarriles Consolidados* (*FFCC Consolidados* - Consolidated Railways) in the east. Both companies were in financial difficulties, but *FFCC Unidos* seemed to be in permanent decline.

The *FFCC Unidos* network infrastructure had badly deteriorated and was in need of massive capital investment. The report and accounts for 1948-9 painted a catastrophic picture of a bankrupt enterprise, operating under government supervision and kept alive by subsidies. The falling price of sugar, to which freight rates were linked, as well as the smaller crop led to revenue from sugar decreasing by half a million pounds sterling. The chairman complained that "the principal difficulty has been the refusal of the labour unions, ..., to permit the company to institute essential economies involving reduction of wages, dismissal of redundant staff and elimination of redundant services".²⁹⁷ This led the writers of the Truslow report to conclude that the wages and conditions of the workers could no longer be sustained at existing levels and were an obstacle to further investment.²⁹⁸ In September 1949, *FFCC Unidos* finally managed to impose 800 job losses and had reduced wages to pre-1945 levels.²⁹⁹ By means of this cut, and with the help of a government subsidy of \$100,000 a month,³⁰⁰ the company was able to stagger on until 1952 when, with mounting debts, it sought further redundancies and early retirements. The new Batista government approved a plan, known after its author Luis Chiappy, whereby the government took a 51% stake and negotiated a loan from the Bank of America and the Hanover Bank to settle accounts with the British stakeholders.³⁰¹ Gustavo Pellón, chairman of *FFCC*

²⁹⁵ Zanetti & García, *Sugar and Railroads* (1998)

²⁹⁶ Durán Cremet, *Movimiento obrero en el sector ferroviario* (1988) p.6

²⁹⁷ *The Times* (November 30th 1950) p.10

²⁹⁸ Zanetti & García, *Caminos para azúcar* (1987) p.358-9

²⁹⁹ *Noticias de Hoy* (September 18th 1949) p.6

³⁰⁰ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 264 (1950) *Labor Notes-Habana*

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 2494 (1951) *Annual Economic Review 1950*

³⁰¹ FO 371/103386 (1953) - *Negotiations over United Railways of Havana*

Consolidados, the other railway company, was named as the *interventor* (government appointed administrator) and thereby took control without any financial liability.

In addition to taking action aimed at resolving the company's immediate financial future, the government announced its intention of imposing the job losses outlined in the Chiappy plan. The workers, having been disappointed by the response of their trade union in 1949, set up a rank and file based *Comité de Lucha* (strike committee) which called a strike at the end of June 1953.³⁰² The government responded with military intervention and decreed that all who did not return to work immediately would be dismissed. Javier Bolaños, national president of the *Hermandad Ferroviaria*, ordered a return to work while saying that he would do everything necessary to ensure that the reduction in staff would be "strictly limited to the numbers that the company required".³⁰³ On the 26th July, an armed group led by Fidel Castro attacked the Moncada barracks in Santiago and, under cover of the resulting repression, the authorities managed to enforce the return to work order and forced further redundancies in August. There is no surviving evidence of workers' reaction to the Moncada attack, although the previous chapter described the hostile reaction of the PSP and it is likely that the outcome did not predispose the railway workers to support for Castro. Their victory over the *FFCC Unidos* workers left the government free to deal with the problems of *FFCC Consolidados*. However, before doing so, Batista managed to improve his position through the elections he called for November 1954. Despite a high level of fraud and the withdrawal at the last minute of his only rival, these elections gave the government a certain level of legitimacy, at least in the eyes of international diplomacy, with the British ambassador describing Batista as "the type of president best suited to the country".³⁰⁴ Once the 1954 elections were out of the way, the regime felt free to address the industrial issues confronting it, starting with the railways.

The financial problems of the *Ferrocarriles Consolidados*, while nowhere near as great as those of *FFCC Unidos*, were far from insignificant, with annual losses averaging \$2.5m. From the start of the economic downturn which resulted from the drop in sugar prices in 1953, the owners had been proposing wage cuts based on the government's decree number 1155, which gave the company the right to set wages according to the economic situation. The company was faced by a trade union

³⁰² *Noticias de Hoy* (July 3rd & 9th 1953)

³⁰³ *Noticias de Hoy* (July 17th 1953)

³⁰⁴ FO371/108990-AK1015/16 (1954) - *Reports that the election campaign is passing quietly*

organisation with a long tradition of militancy and these proposals were met with an outcry from the workers, which forced a delay in implementation that was financed by a government loan.³⁰⁵ Immediately following the November 1954 elections, *FFCC Consolidados* announced 1550 redundancies and a 20% wage cut to be implemented from 1st December 1954.³⁰⁶ The office workers in Camagüey, mainly women, were the first to receive the news as they would have to administer the cuts. They immediately walked out on strike (Figure 7). Some went down to the depot and the workshop where their action was swiftly joined by the drivers and engineers. Others produced leaflets and posters and took to the streets of Camagüey in an impromptu demonstration, which received considerable support in a town that relied on the railway yards for much of its prosperity.³⁰⁷ The wage cuts and redundancies were aimed mainly at the operating staff and so the actions of the administrative workers demonstrate a high level of principled solidarity, although it is also likely that they would find family and friends amongst the workers under attack. As word spread, the action soon extended to the rest of the region, with a large street demonstration bringing the centre of Guantánamo to a standstill.³⁰⁸ The following day, the workers reported for work but initiated a *Paso de Jicotea*³⁰⁹, a go-slow that caused widespread disruption to the service.³¹⁰ Taken aback by the level of resistance, the government declared a truce, suspended the cuts, set up a commission of enquiry with trade union and employer representation and gave the company a further loan.³¹¹

FFCC Consolidados also owned four bus companies operating in Santiago de Cuba, *La Cubana*, *La Cubanita*, *La Criolla* and *La Mambisa*. It tried to use the period of the truce to impose cost-saving measures by locking out the workers in these companies. Many of their colleagues in the other two bus companies in the City withdrew their labour in solidarity; the strike in *La Oriental* was solid, but only partial on *Autobuses Modelos*. The army started rounding up drivers and forcing them to take out their buses. In protest, a number of drivers occupied their local union offices and started a hunger strike but were soon evicted by the police. The police intervention was said to be at the request of Prisciliano Falcón, a leading *mujalista* official in Santiago.

³⁰⁵ Zanetti & García, *Caminos para azúcar* (1987) p.370

³⁰⁶ *El Mundo* (November 9th 1954)

³⁰⁷ "Los Conflictos Sociales" *Bohemia* (November 12th 1954) n.pag.

³⁰⁸ *Voz del Pueblo* (November 13th 1954)

³⁰⁹ "go-slow" literally "to move at the pace of a turtle",

³¹⁰ Cueto, *Las condiciones de trabajo hacen insostenible a los Consolidados* (1954) p.64-5

³¹¹ *Voz del Pueblo* (November 17th-22nd 1954)

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 522 (Nov. 24, 1954) *Consolidated railroad lay-offs suspended*



Figure 7: Office workers in Camagüey preparing for a demonstration, from *Bohemia* (November 21st 1954) n.pag.

The hunger strike then moved to the offices of *Delegación 12* of the railway union and continued for 72 hours, after which the company climbed down, the lock-out was suspended and arrears of salary were paid.³¹²

The company also used the railway truce for an extensive press campaign, which consisted of newspaper advertisements, press statements and carefully placed interviews that argued that railway workers were being paid for hours they did not work and that wages had risen much faster than receipts.³¹³ The advert shown in Figure 8 asserts that for every peso of income, the company expended one peso and 23 cents, of which 91 cents was in wage costs. In particular, the company complained that it was not benefiting from its modernisation programme, giving the example that it only took 10 hours to get from Santa Clara to Santiago, but the crews were still paid for the 20 hours it had taken before the company had invested shareholders money for infrastructure

³¹² *Carta Semanal* (January 12th 1955)

³¹³ eg *Bohemia* (December 26th 1954) p.23, *Voz del Pueblo* (December 21st-24th 1954)

improvements.³¹⁴ In this last argument, we see encapsulated the employers' position on productivity: having invested money for technological improvements, they expected their wage bill to reduce. However, with little prospect of other jobs, the majority of the workers saw no reason why they should have their staffing levels or pay reduced in order to to maintain or increase profit margins; a classic dispute about who should benefit from technological progress. There was little room for compromise between these two entrenched positions.

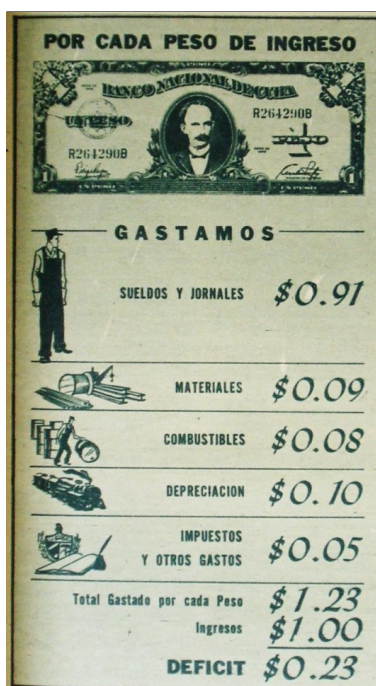


Figure 8: Advert by FFCC Consolidados, from *Bohemia* (December 12th 1954) p.78

The railway workers were not idle during the truce period either, setting up a *Comisión de Propaganda y Finanzas* (Finance and Propaganda Committee) to co-ordinate the resistance. This body organised some short strikes in the Guantánamo region.³¹⁵ Having access to typewriters and duplicating machines, as well as the skills to use them, the women in the administration took a significant role in the production of propaganda material. When the truce ended on January 20th, the company announced that it would withhold 35-40% of the workers' wages, suspend paid holidays and make other, similar economy measures.³¹⁶ As soon as the announcement was made, the Camagüey office workers again demonstrated, loudly proclaiming that they would not implement the cuts.³¹⁷ Despite government

intervention to postpone the problem again, a move greeted as a victory by the CTC bureaucracy, the rail workers themselves did not trust the government and walked out on 3rd February.³¹⁸ The strike spread throughout the network, with many violent confrontations between the police, army and striking workers, along with extensive solidarity actions by workers in other trades. *Carta Semanal* reports that in Morón, local bus and taxi drivers went on solidarity strike and a women's support group was set up in the town.³¹⁹ Archival evidence shows the existence of a number of neighbourhood support networks set up by the female relatives of railwaymen, helped by the women

³¹⁴ Martínez Nogales, *Ferrocarriles Consolidados !Una empresa que salvar!* (1954) p.78

³¹⁵ *Carta Semanal* (January 3rd, 12th & 26th 1955)

³¹⁶ *Voz del Pueblo* (January 21st 1955)

³¹⁷ *Carta Semanal* (February 9th 1955)

³¹⁸ "Trabajo", *Bohemia* (February 6th 1955) n.pag.

³¹⁹ *Carta Semanal* (February 23rd 1955)

from the offices, similar to the Women's Support Groups of the British miners' strike of 1984-5. Women's groups would also be set up by the relatives of dockers and sugar workers during their own strikes later the same year. These actions by women were frequently a force for unity amongst workers of different trades as the women's groups were normally based in the areas where they lived and they were able to use their positions in the neighbourhood to build links of solidarity.

Many of the ports were also owned by the railway companies and dockers in Boquerón and Nuevitas struck in support of their railway colleagues, as a result of which, 58,000 sacks of sugar lay idle on the dock.³²⁰ Other port workers in Matanzas, Caimanera and Manzanillo took advantage of the opportunity to publicly demonstrate both in support of the railway workers, as well as to express their own opposition to bulk loading of sugar.³²¹ It should be remembered that the port workers had a very good practical reason for their solidarity as they recognised that they might need railway support later in their battle to reject the "Sea-Train", a productivity measure with which their own industry was threatened. The most public demonstrations of solidarity took place in Camagüey where the *CTC Federación Provincial* (Provincial Federation), discussed the possibility of a general strike, while many workers independently took part in 10 minute solidarity strikes. All this activity resulted in numerous arrests, in response to which the women of Camagüey organised a demonstration demanding the release of all prisoners.³²²

The *zafra*, (sugar harvest) having only just started, following some difficult negotiations that had left many sugar workers deeply unhappy, Batista was concerned not to provide a pole of resistance which might have inspired disgruntled sugar workers in a movement which could have escaped the control of the trade union bureaucracy. The government therefore decreed another truce on 8th February while the *Tribunal de Cuentas*, the government accountancy service, investigated the situation of the company, this time for 100 days. This new truce was funded with another 700,000 pesos.³²³ The official union *Comité conjunto* (joint committee), which had been set up by the CTC to oversee the action, ordered a return to work without consulting mass meetings in the depots. In Guantánamo, *Delegación II*, the local organisation of the *Hermandad Ferroviaria* covering the membership who worked for *FFCC Consolidados*, denounced

³²⁰ *Voz del Pueblo* (February 3rd 1955)

³²¹ *Carta Semanal* (February 23rd 1955)

³²² *Carta Semanal* (February 16th & 23rd 1955)

³²³ "Trabajo", *Bohemia* (February 13th, 1955) n.pag.

the truce as a sell-out and continued the strike until the 11th, when, following Mujal's personal intervention, they were paid in cash, thereby overcoming the company's attempt to pay 70% in cash and the rest in script until the government subsidy arrived.³²⁴ A special congress of the *Federación Nacional Ferroviaria*³²⁵ was called to ratify the actions of the officials and, given that most of the delegations had not been elected by assemblies of the workers, such ratification was granted, although only after considerable bureaucratic manipulation from the chair.³²⁶ Once assured that the official trade union machinery was back in control and further unofficial action was unlikely, the regime moved against some of the militants, with the Santa Clara courts condemning 18 bus drivers and 72 railwaymen for *huelga ilícita* (illegal strike action).³²⁷

Following the end of the sugar harvest, the report of *Tribunal de Cuentas* recommended an 8% wage cut, forced retirements, scrapping the collective agreement, abolishing many bonuses and lengthening the working day, as well as extensive service cuts.³²⁸ Batista accepted the report and published decree number 1535 on 7th June, the so-called "*Laudo Ferroviario*" (railway arbitration decision), which implemented the recommended measures and gave the company an annual subsidy of 600,000 pesos.³²⁹ Within 48 hours Guantánamo was again out on strike, quickly followed by Camagüey and Santiago, 10,000 workers in all.³³⁰ Now that the sugar harvest was safely gathered in, the full force of the state was moved against the workers, the army was mobilised and the Ministry of Labour denied the very existence of the strike, while the CTC leadership condemned it out of hand. The strikers replied by organising *ciudades-muertas* across the region, completely shutting down Camagüey, Guantánamo, Morón, Nuevitas and Santiago. The tactic of *ciudad-muerta* (dead town) was a form of civic general strike in which not only did the other workers in a town strike in sympathy, but most business and commerce also closed their doors. The bus workers in Santiago who worked in companies owned by the *FFCC Consolidados* also walked out again and, on 9th May, set up camp on the town hall patio in protest.³³¹ The CTC,

³²⁴ *Voz del Pueblo* (February 11th 1955),
Carta Semanal (February 23rd 1955)

³²⁵ National federation of railway unions, including the *Hermandad Ferroviaria* and unions of office-workers

³²⁶ *Carta Semanal* (March 23rd 1955)

³²⁷ *Carta Semanal* (March 30th 1955)

³²⁸ *Carta Semanal* (June 15th 1955), *Diario de la Marina* (8th June 1955)

³²⁹ Zanetti & García, *Caminos para Azúcar* (1987) p.371

³³⁰ *Voz del Pueblo* (June 8th 1955)

³³¹ *Carta Semanal* (May 25th, June 8th 1955)

realising that the action was escaping its control, sent a committee to mediate but still failed to authorise the strike, although claiming to understand the grievance. Javier Balaños, leader of the *Federación Nacional Ferroviaria*, met the directors of *FFCC Consolidados* while appealing to the President to suspend the *laudo* for 30 days. Batista refused to meet union representatives as the police, army and secret policemen started rooting drivers and signalmen out of their houses and forcing them back to work at gun-point.

The role of women in this strike is worthy of note. We have already seen the importance of the women from the offices in launching the strike and that the solidarity actions of family members were of significance. Given that the army was rounding up train-operating and signalling staff, forcing them to work at gunpoint, it was difficult for these workers to publicly demonstrate and picket. In a pattern that was repeated in other industrial disputes of the time, this public role was often taken over by women, either railway office workers or the families of the strikers, who also played a leading role in setting up neighbourhood solidarity committees. While women only made up 10% of the Cuban workforce and many of those were in the notoriously difficult organisational territory of domestic service, the comparatively few trade unionised women workers in the Cuba of the 1950s played a vital role in initiating and sustaining militant action out of all proportion to their numbers.

The *Comité conjunto* capitulated after 5 days. They ordered a return to work despite the continuing strength of the strike and growing solidarity from other workers. The final agreement was denounced by Gerrado Villariño, local president of the *Hermanidad Ferroviaria* in Santiago, while the local leaders in Guantánamo went into hiding to avoid having to implement the order to return to work.³³² In return for a few minor concessions, the *Comité conjunto* accepted an 8% wage cut, 600 redundancies and signed a no-strike agreement, thereby placing the strikers outside the law.³³³ This was the signal for the forces of repression to increase their physical attacks on the workers and, amid the demoralisation caused by the perceived sell-out, the strike was broken.³³⁴ In the days that followed, many of the leading militants were dismissed.³³⁵

Dávila Rodríguez, *Lucharemos hasta el final* (2011)

³³² *Voz del Pueblo* (June 16th 1955)

³³³ "Obreros", *Bohemia* (August 28th 1955) p.68
Diario de la Marina (July 7th 1955)

³³⁴ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1272 (June 20, 1955) *Consolidated Railroads Labor Dispute*

³³⁵ *Carta Semanal* (June 15th, 22nd & 29th, July 13th 1955)
Diario de la Marina (July 7th 1955)

This should not be seen as the end of the matter and the next chapter will describe the way in which the militants who led this dispute, particularly those from Guantánamo, would take stock of the defeat and produce new tactics for which they would soon develop a mass base.

However, the defeat of the workers in one of the oldest unionised sectors of the Cuban economy gave the government and the employers a considerable boost in confidence, so it was surprising how much difficulty they would have in dealing with another group that some did not even see as part of the working class.

Banks

The next important industrial struggle to take place in 1955 was the dispute in the banking industry. This was significant for several reasons. Vicente Pérez, a communist trade union organiser at the time, told the author that he considered this to be a highly significant dispute as the bank workers were often thought to be part of the "aristocracy of labour" or even "middle class". They certainly had no history of industrial action, yet they fought an extremely determined struggle, using strikes, go-slows and other traditional forms of direct industrial action.³³⁶ The essence of their dispute concerned the right to join a union. They finally went down to defeat after a bitter struggle that left many of their leaders victimised, in part because the employers were able to provoke the dispute after the railway workers had been defeated, thereby isolating their movement.

From the beginning of June 1955, the newly elected leader of the Havana bank-workers, José María de la Aguilera (Figure 9), initiated a press campaign for a wage increase of 20% and against the existence of the so-called "*Anexo A*" (Appendix A).³³⁷ This was a list of those who were considered to be "confidential employees" and who were forbidden to join a trade union. The demand for abolition of *Anexo A* was therefore a struggle for the right to organise.³³⁸ The Ministry of Labour became involved and, on the 30th June 1955, when they felt confident that they had broken the resistance on the railways, the government rejected the bank workers' demands and proposed a 5% increase.³³⁹ At a mass meeting in Havana, Aguilera attacked the huge profits of the banks, contrasting the difference between those profits and bank workers' pay, after

La Calle (June 14th 1955)

³³⁶ Pérez, *Interview with Vicente Pérez* (2008)

³³⁷ *Carta Semanal* (June 8th 1955)

³³⁸ Rojas, *1955* (1998) p.41

³³⁹ *Diario de la Marina* (July 1st 1955)

which he received a unanimous vote of support for his call for an immediate *paso de jicotea*.³⁴⁰



Figure 9: José Maria de la Aguilera, from *Bohemia* (1955)

Meanwhile José Ignacio de la Cámara, president of the employers' association, counter-attacking the new leadership of the union, maintained that the contract of employment was more appropriate for the bull market of previous period and that the banks needed to build up their reserves. He claimed that, at a time when other industries were cutting wages, the banks were increasing the number of their employees, so therefore a wage freeze was the best they could offer. After Ministry of Labour mediation in the dispute, Aguilera told the government that the 5%

offer was ridiculous, given the low wages in some parts of the country, and that it broke the constitutional right to a living wage for heads of families and, furthermore, that senior employees had received much larger rises.³⁴¹ In fact, 1,300 of the 2,300 the bank employees in Havana were earning less than \$200 per month while only 230 earned more than \$300, even as bank profits were rising significantly. The full 20% claim would only amount to 9% of the banks' profits.³⁴²

Following a strike on the 7th July, the employers started to victimise known militants. The CTC initially supported the industrial action, but Mujal's return from a trip to Washington changed the situation as he accused Aguilera of indiscipline. The Havana bank workers begin a *huelga de brazos caídos* (strike of fallen arms), a form of action that involved the workers reporting for work but doing little or nothing while on the premises. At the end of July, this *movimiento de brazos caídos* was extended to all banks nationwide as the government issued a decree freezing wages in the sector and giving the strikers 72 hours to return to normal working, after which dismissals would be authorised.³⁴³ The complete paralysis of the country's economy that had previously been predicted was avoided as senior staff managed to run a limited emergency service.

³⁴⁰ *Diario de la Marina* (July 8th 1955)

Cueto, *La opinión obrera* (1955) pp.64-5

³⁴¹ "Bancarios", *Bohemia* (July 24th 1955) p.68

³⁴² Valdespino, *El Problema Bancario* (1955) p.50

³⁴³ *Carta Semanal* (August 3rd 1955)

Diario de la Marina (July 22nd)

Representatives of business and commerce fell in behind the banks and condemned the breach of the government decree while, on 30th August, the Ministry of Labour used its powers of "intervention" to seize formal control of the Havana branch of the bank workers union; an action solicited by Mujal with the support of the leadership of the national federation.³⁴⁴

The strike hardened as control of the union became an issue when the CTC executive voted to support government intervention. This gave the green light to police repression, with many arrests and violent attacks on striking workers.³⁴⁵ Strikers, ejected from their own premises by the police, set up a new strike office in the premises of the *Juventud Obrera Católica* (JOC - Catholic Labour Youth), a Social-Christian organisation, of which many bank-workers were members, which was led by Padre Enrique Oslé, a friend of the bus workers' leader Marco Hirigoyen.³⁴⁶ This involvement of the Catholic Church provoked a ferocious debate between Mujal and Padre Oslé of the JOC, enabling Mujal to claim that he was defending secular trade union independence against Church interference.³⁴⁷ There was considerable rank and file support for the bank workers within the CTC nationally and the communist party newspaper, *Carta Semanal*, reported solidarity stoppages of 10 -15 minutes in an impressive list of workplaces but, despite the concerns expressed by some of Mujal's internal rivals on the CTC executive, such as Angel Cofiño, the leader of the electrical workers' union, the CTC apparatus remained loyal to Mujal.³⁴⁸

On the 8th September, in a last ditch attempt, a delegation of 500 strikers went to the Cardinal-Archbishop's palace and asked him to intervene, but this was construed as a mark of weakness by the employers who refused the Church's offer of mediation. The *Diario de la Marina*, the main right-wing daily newspaper in Havana, was quite clear that, in order to win, the strikers needed to paralyse the economic life of the whole country and, having failed to do so, they went down to defeat.³⁴⁹ The role of Mujal in orchestrating the return to work is significant, as he played a much more active and devious role than in the earlier railway dispute. On the 6th September, Mujal met both President Batista and José María de la Aguilera. Two places on the "intervention

³⁴⁴ *Diario de la Marina* (September 2nd 1955)

³⁴⁵ *Diario de la Marina* (September 3rd 1955)

³⁴⁶ "Bancarios", *Bohemia* (September 11th 1955) p.72
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 106 (Aug. 3, 1955) *Labor Developments*

³⁴⁷ Cueto, *Una Polémica de Actualidad* (1955) n.pag.

³⁴⁸ *Carta Semanal* (September 21st 1955)

³⁴⁹ *Diario de la Marina* (September 9th & 10th 1955)

committee", set up to implement the seizure of the Havana branch of the union by the Ministry of Labour, were offered to the old executive as well as freedom for arrested strikers, 98 men and 2 women, in return for normal working, with a promise that the government would study the wage claim.³⁵⁰ Demoralised and undermined, the workers returned to normal working on the 12th and 13th, while Mujal promised to work for the release of the detainees and the reinstatement of the 174 dismissed workers; to little effect in the case of the sackings, with the announcement on the 15th that they would stand in the majority of cases.³⁵¹

This incident is a good example the *mujalista* method. In his report to the executive of the *Federación Bancaria*, Mujal spoke of the need to achieve a wage increase and that, while he rejected all dismissals, there was an absolute need to stop all industrial action and to restore internal discipline by taking disciplinary action against the leaders in Havana who had "provoked the difficulty".³⁵² As may be expected, he expended much more energy on the question of internal discipline than on reversing the dismissals, which had to wait until the revolutionary victory in 1959.³⁵³ On the 31st October, the Ministry of Labour awarded a wage increase of 10% but greatly increased the number of workers on *Anexo A*, thereby indicating that the real issue at stake was not the employers' ability to pay an increase, but rather an attack on militant trade unionism.³⁵⁴ Immediately following the dispute, Andrés Valdespino, writing in the weekly journal *Bohemia*, correctly argued that the attack on bank workers was part of an emerging pattern of wage cuts and mass redundancies.³⁵⁵

Other trades

The pattern of cuts of which Valdespino speaks continued to be implemented sector by sector, with every effort made to prevent generalisation of the resistance. An example of this is the dispute with the telegraph workers, which started over a government cut in seniority payments in the summer of 1955. Given the situation described above in the banking industry and fearing that they were in danger of fighting

³⁵⁰ *Diario de la Marina* (September 7th 1955)

³⁵¹ *Diario de la Marina* (September 13th, 14th 1955)

³⁵² *Diario de la Marina* (September 20th 1955)

³⁵³ *Revolución* (February 14th 1959)

³⁵⁴ *Diario de la Marina* (November 1st 1955)

Carta Semanal (November 9th 1955)

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 466 (Dec. 30, 1955) *Labor Developments: Cuba, Aug.-December 1955* contains a full account of the bank strike

³⁵⁵ Valdespino, *¿De quien ha sido el triunfo en el conflicto bancario?* (1955)

on two fronts, the government offered a compromise of a 4% cut for everyone. A partial strike at the beginning of July won a promise of continuation of the seniority payments but, at end of month, these were much reduced. An apparently spontaneous strike broke out and, in response, the authorities at first tried repression, with 205 arrests, 80 of them women, while the army took over the service. When it became clear that there was a danger of this dispute joining up with the bank-workers, the CTC negotiated a compromise that would restore seniority payments in September.³⁵⁶

In 1955 there were many single factory strikes, but the record is necessarily patchy and depends upon the presence of a reporter to write the story or whether the press had anything that was considered more important that week. A list of single enterprise strikes taken from the pages *Bohemia* and *Carta Semanal* for 1955 and displayed below in Table 2 gives some idea of the extent of the activity. This table indicates a high level of industrial action in a wide range of industries. What is noticeable is the militancy with which the actions were fought, with attempts to spread the action through demonstrations and symbolic occupations of public buildings. However the government, in collaboration with the trade union bureaucracy, managed to isolate each action in its immediate locality, preventing a widening of solidarity. This permitted the police and army to crack down on the strikers in many cases without having to worry about the action becoming more generalised. Nevertheless this did not always lead to defeat.

Date	Place	Factory	Activity
26 Jan	Havana	La Galleteria (bakers)	Strike against imposed contract Police intervene to declare " <i>Huelga ilicita</i> "
9 Feb 23 Feb	Manzanillo	Zapateros (shoemakers)	400 on strike against wage cuts and job losses Street and workplace collections. Demonstrations. 80 arrests
9 Feb	Havana	Havana Post (newspaper)	On strike, paper is only published because of management strike breaking
6 Apr	Luyanó, Havana	Hatuey (brewery)	" <i>Paso de jicotea</i> " against management abuse.

³⁵⁶ "Telegrafistas", *Bohemia* (28th August 1955) p.78
Carta Semanal (24th & 31st August 1955)
 U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 151 (Aug. 23, 1955) *Telegraph strike*

27 Apr	Pinar del Rio	Las Minas de Matahambre	48 hour strike
8 Jun	Havana	La Tropical, La Polar (brewery)	Brewers strike and occupy factory. Police dislodge workers and arrest leaders. Charged with " <i>huelga ilícita</i> " y " <i>ocupación ilegal de fábrica</i> "
	Manzanillo	La Oriental (foodstuffs)	<i>Obreros de fideos</i> on strike against 52% wage cut - occupy town hall
15 Jun	Manzanillo	La Oriental	Removed from town hall by police, move to <i>Centro de Veteranos</i> , but moved again.
6 Jul	Havana	La Ambrosia (brewery)	Strike
13 Jul	Luyanó, Havana	Hatuey (brewery)	" <i>Paso de jicotea</i> " still continuing
27 Jul	Manzanillo	Zapateros	Strike against CRIC (<i>Comité Reguladora de la Industria del Calzado</i> or Regulatory Committee for the Footwear Industry). Army occupies town, barricades in response, broken by army.
16 Aug	Guanabacoa, Havana	Zapateros	500 demonstrate against CRIC
28 Sep 2 Nov	Matanzas	La Rayonera (textiles)	½ hour first day, ¾ 2nd, 1 hour third Strike ended 300 redundancies suspended
2 Nov - 14 Dec	Marianao, Havana	Tejaleros (roofing tiles)	Against wage cuts. Finally win after 51 days
23 Nov 7, 14 Dec	Cotorro, Havana	Hatuey Brewery	Strike starts after 4 weeks of agitation. Reject truce and retain CTC support. Finally sold out by CTC

It is worth looking more closely at two of these strikes, the *Tejaleros* or roofing-tile makers of the Havana suburb of Marianao and the textile workers from *la Rayonera* factory in Matanzas. These strikes had very different outcomes. The textile workers suffered a wage cut although they did manage to prevent redundancies, while the *tejaleros* were ultimately successful in winning their demands. We shall see that these two different outcomes resulted in the workers concerned drawing different conclusions, with the *Rayonera* workers moving towards the politics of the M-26-7 and the *tejaleros* retaining their traditional support of the PSP.

There had already been a significant level of conflict in the Matanzas textile industry when, in September 1955, Gerado Fundora Nuñez, spokesman for the workers of *la Rayonera* textile factory, summed up his view of the situation as follows:

*There is a campaign to convince the people and government of Cuba that industrial development requires the higher profits that result from wage cuts and changes to social legislation.*³⁵⁷

Previously, in 1952, *la Rayonera* had tried to abrogate the collective agreement and impose redundancies on the grounds of unprofitability. This ended in a series of riots which were repressed by the police and army on October 2nd, during which the union local office was seriously damaged.³⁵⁸ In February 1953, following a 20% wage cut, there was a 103 day strike by the province's sisal workers which received considerable solidarity from the workers in *la Rayonera*, who went on to refuse to work fabric with less than 30% Cuban fibres.³⁵⁹ The army again intervened in June 1954 to defeat a factory occupation at *la Rayonera* against proposed redundancies.³⁶⁰ The situation finally came to a head in August 1955, when the end of a tax-break led the company to go on a productivity offensive, claiming lack of financial viability. Management demanded 277 redundancies with the same level of production and 8 hours work instead of 6 for the same pay. They threatened otherwise to close the business in October, while bringing troops into the factory to intimidate the workers; indeed it was an army officer who read out to the workers the list of names of those who would continue to work. The workers responded first with a slowdown and then with a rolling strike, with half an hour on the first day, three quarters of an hour the second, one hour the third, until the company locked them out and used the army to eject them from the factory (see Figure 10).³⁶¹

The workers set up a strike headquarters in the provincial CTC offices but the army and police expelled them from there as well. This led the movement to become generalised and escalated to a *cuidad-muerta* in the city of Matanzas. The shop assistants in the Woolworth store in the city, almost entirely women, were amongst the leaders of this movement of solidarity, defying the army who attempted to force them to reopen. The army organised strike breaking and attempted to force shops to open while

³⁵⁷ Cueto, *En la Rayonera hace tiempo que los obreros están 'levantando parejo'* (1955) pp.54-5 [my translation]

³⁵⁸ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 510 (Oct. 3, 1952) *Henequen workers strike*

³⁵⁹ Chávez Alvarez, *Matanzas de rojo y negro* (2007) pp.94-97

³⁶⁰ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1586 (June 30, 1954) *Labor difficulties at textile plant*

³⁶¹ *Carta Semanal* (September 28th 1955)

soldiers drove the buses.³⁶² However, repression failed to break the strike and, with the situation getting out of hand, Batista called in Mujal and the two agreed a truce to await the report of a commission of enquiry. This took the heat out of the situation and allowed the company to introduce the pay cuts, although not the redundancies, in a piecemeal fashion over the course of the next few months.



Figure 10: Picket line at *La Rayonera* poses for *Bohemia* (December 4th 1955) p.55

While in most of the disputes we have discussed so far, the government and the employers were able to get most of what they wanted, they did not have it all their own way, as can be seen from the dispute in the Havana suburb of Marianao between the *tejaleros* (roofing tile makers) and their employers. The dispute started in November 1955 against a management attempt to impose wage cuts. The action started as a *paso de jicotea* which soon escalated into an occupation. The army violently ejected the strikers from the factory and the employer locked them out. In response, the strikers occupied the local offices of the CTC *Federación provincial*. The locally high profile provided by this occupation of the union offices enabled them to organise a demonstration of support by other workers and students, as a result of which the army occupied the neighbourhood. The strikers elected a strike committee and family members set up an *Asociación de Mujeres y Familiares de los Tejaleros* (women's

³⁶² Rojas, 1955 (1998) pp.53-4
"Conflicto" *Bohemia* (October 30th 1955) pp.69-71

group) to organise solidarity. After 4 weeks, the Ministry of Labour threatened dismissal to all who did not return to work. The workers responded with demonstrations outside the *Ayuntamiento* (Town Hall) and managed to win the support of the *Alcalde* (Mayor). The CTC leadership proposed a compromise of a reduced wage cut of 10%, but the workers rejected this. Finally after 51 days on strike, management capitulated and the strikers won.

It is hard to say why these workers were successful when so many other were not, but the factors in their success would have included the history of solidarity in the town, the presence of a large communist party branch capable of generating solidarity outside the immediate area, the community involvement through the women's support group and the approaching showdown with the sugar workers. Whatever the reasons, the political consequences of these two strikes present examples of an oft repeated tendency; workers who manage to defend their conditions by traditional trade union practices, such as the Marianao roofing tile makers, stayed loyal to the communist party and its policy of peaceful mass action, while those who were defeated turned towards the July 26th movement and its policy of violent confrontation with the forces of the state. Thus, the textile workers of Matanzas led by Julián Alemán, who joined the M-26-7 in September 1955, would provide one of the earliest working class bases for the 26th July *Sección Obrera*.³⁶³

Students

Students are not workers in the sense of the term defined in the Introduction but, nevertheless, in Cuba they had a long history of making common cause with organised labour. Students commonly felt that their prospects would be improved by an economy run in the interests of local industry, which attracted them to revolutionary nationalist politics in considerable numbers. Given that many were educated in fields in which there was scant chance of employment, they shared the experience of economic insecurity with the sons and daughters of the workers and peasants and this gave a material basis to the alliance between revolutionary nationalist students and class conscious workers. Take, for example, the journal *Taina*, produced by the *Asociación de Alumnos del Instituto de Segunda Enseñanza de Santiago de Cuba* (Santiago Association of Secondary School Students) in the period 1954-56. Its politics spoke of the need to industrialise the country, called for patriotic Cubans to buy Cuban products

³⁶³ Machado, *El movimiento obrero henequenero* (2011) n.pag [manuscript in author's possession]

and expressed opposition to redundancies, to wage cuts and to bulk loading of sugar.³⁶⁴ This tradition of mutual aid between workers and students would be of particular importance in 1955.

Significant numbers of students had opposed the Batista regime from the outset with strikes, demonstrations and riots. On 6th April 1952, the *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* (FEU - federation of university students) in Havana symbolically buried the constitution and declared a strike until 28th April. Indeed, the first martyr to the violent repression with which the regime met overt opposition was a student, Rubén Batista Rubio, who died as a result of injuries received on a student demonstration on 15th January 1953, called to protest at the desecration of the monument to an earlier student leader, Julio Antonio Mella.³⁶⁵ Cuban students proved themselves adept at using patriotic occasions for demonstrations against the regime, thereby giving themselves a cloak of nationalist legitimacy. Thus, in Santiago de Cuba, the first fights between students and police took place on 7th December 1952 as the students boycotted the official commemoration of independence war hero Antonio Maceo and organised an alternative event which was attacked by the forces of order.³⁶⁶ This use of official events for unofficial demonstrations was also useful for joint events to build unity between students and workers. For example, on Mayday 1953 there were two events in Santiago, the official Labour Day commemoration, where Guillermo Mestre of the electrical trades union, who represented the national leadership of the CTC, gave the address stressing the need to keep politics out of the unions, while an alternative meeting took place in the local premises of the Bacardi workers' union, the *Sindicato de Licores* (drinks workers' union). This was jointly organised with the federations representing university and secondary students and was addressed by the communist Juan Taquechel, leader of the Santiago dockers.³⁶⁷ This relationship between workers and students would be strengthened by developments within student politics.

³⁶⁴ Poveda Diaz, *Propaganda y revolución en Santiago de Cuba* (2003) pp.59-61

³⁶⁵ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1100 (Jan. 16, 1953) *Student Riots Quelled By Police and Firemen*
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1271 (Feb. 13, 1953) *Joint Weeka No. 7 for State, Army, Navy, and Air Departments*

Mella was a founder member of both the FEU and the Cuban Communist Party. He fled to Mexico to escape the Machado dictatorship, but was murdered there, probably by an assassin employed by the Machado regime. For more details see Christine Hatzky's biography: Hatzky, *Julio Antonio Mella* (2008)

³⁶⁶ *Diario de Cuba* (December 9th 1952)

³⁶⁷ *Diario de Cuba* (May 3rd 1953)

There was an ongoing political battle within the student federations between three principal tendencies: those students who wanted to get on with their studies and were not concerned with politics; those who felt there could be a political solution resulting from a compromise with Batista; those who felt an uncompromising hostility to the dictatorship.³⁶⁸ Elections were mainly won by the third group, although not always, as shown by the defeat of the *Estudiantes Martianos* in the *Escuela Profesional de Comercio* (Professional Commercial School) in Santiago by a slate dedicated to "*no más hablar de política*" (no more talk of politics).³⁶⁹ Generally though, the opposition performed better in the student elections and young men and women who would later become important revolutionaries, such as Jorge Ibarra and Frank País served as student union officers. The most significant election, however, was that of the openly revolutionary José Antonio Echeverría (Figure 11) as national president of the FEU, which represented a distinct radicalisation within the student milieu.³⁷⁰



Figure 11: José Antonio Echeverría, from *Bohemia* (1955)

The election of Echeverría in early 1955 raised the stakes in the battle with the authorities. The first major student demonstration thereafter, in May in Matanzas to commemorate the murder of the nationalist leader Antonio Guiteras twenty years previously, was viciously attacked by the police and Echeverría himself was hospitalised.³⁷¹ This was followed by a police raid, which destroyed the FEU offices in the university.³⁷² There are two principal treatments of student

struggles against Batista, one by Julio García Oliveres, the other by Jaime Suchlicki which, while displaying radically different political biases, are broadly in agreement in their narratives.³⁷³ Julio García Oliveres, a friend and political ally of Echeverría, writes

³⁶⁸ García Oliveres, *El movimiento estudiantil antibatistiano* (2009) p.15

³⁶⁹ Poveda Díaz, *Propaganda y revolución en Santiago de Cuba* (2003) p.91

³⁷⁰ "Elecciones en la FEU" *Bohemia* (April 24th 1955) p.72

³⁷¹ "La FEU protesta", *Bohemia* (May 15th 1955) n.pag.

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1105 (May 10, 1955) *Student disturbances*

³⁷² "Registro en la universidad", *Bohemia* (July 17th 1955) n.pag

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 127, Aug. 16, 1955 *University Disturbances*

³⁷³ Suchlicki, *University students and revolution in Cuba, 1920-1968* (1969)

García Oliveres, *José Antonio Echeverría: la lucha estudiantil contra Batista* (1979)

García Oliveres, *Contra Batista* (2008)

that the 1953 Moncada attack and the subsequent murders had convinced Echeverría and his immediate circle that there was no possible compromise with Batista and that there was need for a bigger change than just a return to the situation before the coup.³⁷⁴ There was a process of political development among the more radical students as the struggle progressed and by the end of 1955, Echeverría was openly talking of "*la Revolución Cubana*".³⁷⁵

In parallel with these developments, the violence of the regime showed that traditional tactics of demonstration and strike were no longer sufficient in themselves. The repressive response to the election of Echeverría failed to intimidate the new student leadership but caused them to rethink their tactics, resulting in an open turn towards the organised working class while, in parallel forming a clandestine armed organisation called the *Directorio Revolucionario*.³⁷⁶ There were traditional bonds of solidarity between the students and militant workers, who frequently came to the university seeking support.³⁷⁷ The police reaction to a student march in Santiago provided the opportunity to give the relationship a practical application.

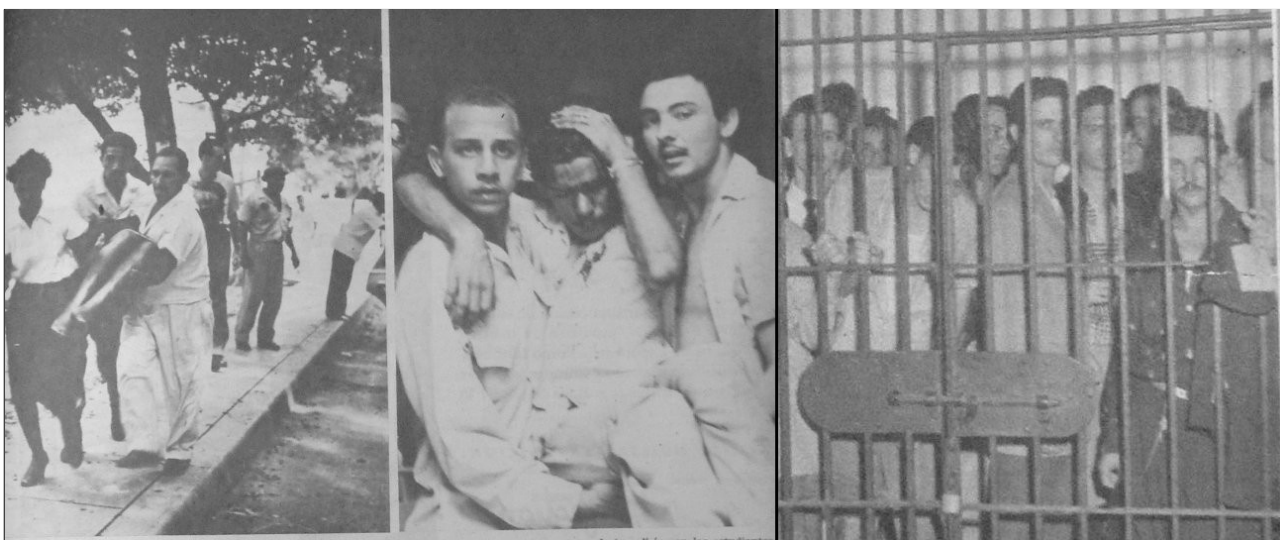


Figure 12: Press photos of student demonstrators, from *Bohemia* (December 11th 1955) n.pag

On 27th November 1955, the students in Santiago celebrated their traditional event to commemorate the execution of a group of patriotic medical students by the Spanish authorities in 1871. At the same time, they also raised the issue of a colleague, Narciso Martínez, who had disappeared the previous July and was commonly believed

García Oliveras, *El movimiento estudiantil antibatistiano y la ideología de la Revolución* (2009)

³⁷⁴ García Oliveras, *Contra Batista* (2008) p.173

³⁷⁵ Berdayes-García, *Papeles del Presidente* (2006) pp.56-63

³⁷⁶ Solar-Cabrales, *El Directorio, revolucionario de su tiempo* (2009) pp.24-50

³⁷⁷ García-Oliveras, *Contra Batista* (2008) p.231

to have been murdered by the police. This infuriated the police who attacked the demonstration. The students tried to barricade themselves in the Town Hall, but were ejected violently and three days of rioting ensued.³⁷⁸ This spread to Havana on the 30th where the FEU executive called a 72 hour strike in solidarity with Santiago. There was more violence on the 7th December when students tried to lay a wreath at the monument to the national hero Antonio Maceo, but this time photographs of the results of the police brutality appeared in the press (Figure 12).

Most of FEU leaders were now in prison, so the 10th December executive meeting was composed mainly of deputies, one of whom, quoting the student worker alliance of 1933, proposed a five minute national strike on the 14th. Student organisers visited a large number of workplaces where they received a positive response from workers disillusioned with the performance of their official union leaders. The CTC officialdom, with the exception of the *Gastronómicos* (hotel and catering workers), opposed the action, but nevertheless, it was very well followed, particularly in transport, banks, docks, tobacco, shops, hotels and restaurants, indicating a growing disillusion with both the official unions and the regime. The list of workplaces taking action in support of the students filled a whole page of *Carta Semanal*.³⁷⁹ According to Bonachea and Valdés, dockers in the ports of Havana, Regla, Santiago, Cienfuegos, Nuevitás, Matanzas and Manzanillo, "simply refused to work for the rest of the day causing chaos in busy ports".³⁸⁰ It was widely reported that Mujal himself was kept waiting for five minutes for his coffee when the waiters refused to serve him in a café.³⁸¹ The success of the strike helped to raise political tensions and Echeverría, on his release from prison, promised to return the solidarity.³⁸² Following a visit to the university by the Las Villas sugar workers' leader, Conrado Béquer, he would shortly get the opportunity.

Sugar

While the government and the employers had been relatively successful in their productivity drive up to this point, the real test would come in their battle with the sugar workers, which was widely recognised as being inevitable as the harvest season

³⁷⁸ "Disturbios estudiantiles", *Bohemia* (December 4th 1955) n.pag.

³⁷⁹ *Carta Semanal* (December 28th 1955)

³⁸⁰ Bonachea & Valdés, *Cuba in Revolution* (1972) p.56

³⁸¹ "Estudiantes", *Bohemia* (December 18th 1955) p.64-5

³⁸² "Mantendremos sin tregua nuestra lucha", *Carteles* (January 1st 1955)

approached at the beginning of 1956. The nature of the Cuban economy meant that the sugar workers union, the *Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Azucareros* (FNTA - National Federation of Sugar Workers) had always been the most important part of the Cuban labour movement and because of this, defeating the sugar workers was vital to any attempt to force through productivity increases. A government failure to impose its will on the sugar workers would have given heart to other industrial sectors and undermined the employers' productivity drive. The fall in the international price of sugar in the early 1950s made this battle doubly important as there was a real crisis in the industry. From the point of view of the labour movement, this dispute is also significant as it was followed by the first major split in the trade union bureaucracy. The subsequent intervention of the Ministry of Labour in defence of Mujal's position in the union, following similar intervention in the earlier bank workers' dispute, shows the increased dependence of the *mujalistas* on state support as they lost influence amongst the rank and file. Faced with this attitude on behalf of much of the official leadership, the workers displayed an ability to organise independently. All of these themes will recur in the following years leading up to the revolution.

Chapter Two described how the government, as part of the strategy outlined by the London Sugar Agreement, had reduced the length of time that cane was harvested. This caused a reduction in the overall annual wage earned by the sugar workers. The failure of the London Sugar Agreement to stop the fall in prices meant that this reduction in their wage bill was still not enough for the employers to make profits. They therefore needed further cuts, which could now only be achieved by a cut in the actual rate of pay and a reduction the numbers employed, with the remaining workers being expected to work harder. This dispute would leave the sugar workers defeated in their immediate gains, but at the cost for the government of alienating a significant number of workers and causing the first of several splits in the CTC bureaucracy. The employers were also dissatisfied by the outcome, as they were still expected to pay a bonus, albeit at a lower rate than the workers demanded. They had expected the government to destroy all resistance and the first signs of a cooling of business support for Batista are visible.

In 1953, as part of its attempts to stabilise the international price of sugar, the government had restricted the harvest to 4,750,000 tons and reduced wages.³⁸³ A further

³⁸³ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1203 (Feb. 4, 1953) *High Court Rules Against Payment of Union Dues by Employers*

reduction was under consideration for 1955.³⁸⁴ In 1954, wages and conditions were frozen to 1953 levels, perhaps to avoid trouble before the elections, but the employers considered this to be economically unviable in view of the fall in prices.³⁸⁵ As a result the employers proposed a *pro-rata* wage rate based on the price of sugar.³⁸⁶ This produced an outcry, even from the moderate leader of the FNTA, José Luis Martínez.³⁸⁷



Figure 13: Conrado Béquer & Conrado Rodríguez ("Los dos Conrados"), from *Bohemia* (1956)

The FNTA in Oriente province called for a 24 hour strike to demand the dismissal of the Minister of Labour.³⁸⁸ The FNTA national conference in January 1955 supported Martínez's stand, with more militant elements agitating for an all-out strike.³⁸⁹ Following a round table discussion with both the employers and the unions, the government decreed a harvest of 4,400,000 tons and a 7.31% wage cut, which would result in a saving for the employers of 23 million pesos, 15% of their wage bill.³⁹⁰ The decree also authorised bulk sugar loading, a measure which would have led

to thousands of job-losses.³⁹¹ There was uproar in the FNTA conference, but Mujal persuaded the delegates to refer the strike call to a joint CTC/FNTA executive meeting. There, away from the pressure of the conference, Martínez and Mujal opposed a strike as impractical, saying that the FNTA was not prepared. The final vote was 53 - 19 against strike action.³⁹²

This conference is the first sign of a developing schism in the CTC bureaucracy and the emergence of a left-wing opposition centred around Conrado Rodríguez and Conrado Béquer, known popularly as *los dos Conrados* (Figure 13). Béquer was deputy general secretary of the FNTA and they were both *Auténtico* parliamentary deputies.

³⁸⁴ "Azucar", *Bohemia* (January 2nd 1955) n.pag.

³⁸⁵ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 434 (Oct. 25, 1954) *Labor Developments*

³⁸⁶ FO 371/108990 - AK1015/1&3 (1954) *Internal situation in Cuba*

³⁸⁷ Cueto, *El Problema Social de la Zafra'* (1955) pp.52-3

³⁸⁸ *El Mundo* (December 16th 1954)

³⁸⁹ "Azucar", *Bohemia* (January 23rd 1955) n.pag.

³⁹⁰ Pardo Llada. *La Pobre Zafra de 55* (1955) p.59
El Mundo (January 20th 1955)

³⁹¹ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 955 (March 31, 1955) *Labor Developments*

³⁹² "Obreros", *Bohemia* (January 30th 1955) p.65

They would go on to play significant roles in the Cuban revolution. This conference was also the first report at national level of an intervention by David Salvador, a shop steward from *central Stewart* near Ciego de Avila, who would soon become a founder member of the M-26-7 and would lead the revolutionary CTC after the revolution.

Following the formal acceptance of the government decree, employers in the province of Las Villas started declaring mass redundancies while Conrado Rodriguez, the provincial FNTA leader, publicly accused Mujal and Martínez of betrayal.³⁹³ There was considerable disillusion at this climb-down, both within the rank and file and among a minority of the FNTA leadership. On the other side, the employers had been looking for a much greater cut in their wage bill.³⁹⁴ The Ministry of Labour repaid the FNTA bureaucracy for their help in defusing the situation by delaying the scheduled union elections in which it was unlikely that any of the *mujalistas* on the executive could have retained their seats.³⁹⁵ The scene was therefore set for a confrontation the following year, by which time, having defeated the railway workers and the bank clerks, the government would feel more confident. Meanwhile, both sides limbered up with a series of increasingly bitter skirmishes as can be seen in Table 3 below on sugar industry strikes during 1955, which details reports from *Carta Semanal* and *Bohemia* during 1955.

3 Jan ³⁹⁶ 12 Jan 23 Feb	Oriente	Delicias-Cha parra	Strike over job losses started previous October. 200 women prevent arrested workers being taken to Holguin by train, then prevented strike breakers entering workplace. Women's group goes to Tunas y Holguin to seek solidarity Strike Continues <i>Zafra</i> starts with no job losses but needed strike to get overtime pay.
12 Jan	Oriente	Central Carolina	15 day strike against 4 day week - " <i>¡Trabajamos semana completa o no trabajamos!</i> " (we work the whole week or not at all) - Successful
12 Jan	Camagüey	Central Morón	<i>Paso de jicotea</i> - army surrounds assembly

³⁹³ "Trabajo", *Bohemia* (February 6th 1955) n.pag.

³⁹⁴ FO 371/108990 - AK1015/3 (1954) *Possible Labour Developments*

³⁹⁵ "Trabajo", *Bohemia* (February 24th 1955) n.pag

³⁹⁶ Dates for issues of *Carta Semanal*, unless specified as *Bohemia*.

12 Jan	Guantánamo	Ingenios Esperanza, Soldedad, Isabel	Management agree to start of repairs on the same conditions as last year and withdraw threats of wage cuts following threatened industrial action
16 Feb	Camaguey	Central Florida	Strike against job losses
23 Feb (20 Feb in Bohemia)	Las Villas	Central Estrella	84 redundancies lead to strike - 60 workers arrested but released as strike continues and company give way. Women active in solidarity. in Central Estrella. FNTA plenary attacked by police in Las Villas.
	Matanzas	Central Dolores	Strike
		Central Tacahó	Strike
20 March (Bohemia)		Central Soledad	Sugar workers' wives and families occupy company offices, but dislodged by army. Conrado Béquer arrested ³⁹⁷
6 April	Havana	Central Hershey	48 hour strike to defend " <i>escalafón</i> " (seniority agreement)
14 Sep (11 Sep in Bohemia) 6 Nov	Las Villas	Central Washington (owned by Batista)	Assembly to discuss proposed 40 redundancies. Police attack, 9 gunshot, 20 machete wounds. CTC equivocate, strike threats in Las Villas. Sugar workers occupy site hospital, start hunger strike, families occupy school, then occupy church and <i>ayuntamiento</i> . Solidarity strikes in the region. Company claims bankruptcy. Mujal washes his hands of matter. <i>Dos Conrados</i> occupy church tower, intervention ordered. More army violence, intervener eventually concedes to workers and redundancies are withdrawn
23 Nov	Sancti Spiritus	Central Amazonas	Demonstration in support of strike against sacking of 84 workers.

Detailed information on most of these local disputes is scarce, but Gillian McGillivray, basing her research on interviews with survivors, as well as Díaz's earlier interviews, writes in some detail about the strike at *Delicias y Chaparra*, in the region of Las Tunas (her account tallies with contemporary details in *Carta Semanal*).³⁹⁸ This dispute shows the use of tactics that would become widespread in the national strike which would break out at the end of the year. This dispute demonstrates the problems faced by the employers and the government in their later full scale onslaught on the

³⁹⁷ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 916 (March 22, 1955) *Congressman detained by military*

³⁹⁸ McGillivray, *Blazing Cane* (2009) pp.261-263

Díaz, *La huelga que decidieron las mujeres* (1990) p.160-167

sugar workers. It is also important because of the detailed description of the role of women who provided solidarity.

The strike started in October 1954 following an announcement by the company that there would be job cuts in the forthcoming harvest. A group of strikers occupied the town hall, but were quickly ejected by the Rural Guard. Women from the strikers' families, supported by the local branch of the communist women's organisation, the *Federación Democrática de Mujeres Cubanas* (FDMC - Democratic Federation of Cuban Women), then retook the town hall and held it. They also managed to intimidate the Rural Guard into giving them the keys of the union local office which they then kept open throughout the dispute. This is an example of the frequently seen phenomenon, whereby agents of the state were prepared to use a high level of brutality against male strikers, but were reluctant to beat women in the same way. Militant women were able to use this reluctance to the strikers' advantage. Most of the *mujalista* union officials had disappeared at the first sign of trouble and the strikers organised themselves in the absence of their official leaders by holding daily mass meetings, despite the presence of Rural Guardsmen on horseback with drawn sabres. Dockers in the local port of Juan Claro refused to load sugar for the duration of the strike while women from dockworkers' families joined the women's support groups set up by the families of sugar workers. In confirmation of the role played by women in this dispute, a contemporary report in *Carta Semanal* also tells us that 200 women managed to prevent police taking workers who had been arrested to Holguin by train and also stopped would-be strike breakers from entering the workplace.³⁹⁹ Further, it was reported that the women's group went to the nearby towns of Tunas and Holguin in order to seek solidarity. The fact that *Delicias y Chaparra* was owned by an American company gave the strike a nationalist twist and there was considerable public support and material solidarity from all over Cuba, with the strikers being able to paint themselves as the true patriots. It was probably this patriotic solidarity that put sufficient pressure on the Ministry of Labour to rule in favour of the workers and give them a victory after an action which lasted 104 days.⁴⁰⁰ This local victory had an important encouraging effect for the mass of sugar workers.

³⁹⁹ *Carta Semanal* (January 3rd 1955)

⁴⁰⁰ McGillivray, *Blazing Cane* (2009) pp.261-263

As the 1955 *tiempo muerto*⁴⁰¹ progressed, workers at local union meetings started formulating their demands; a process that the authorities tried to intimidate by the threat of violence up and down the country. The police attack on the workers of *central Washington* in Las Villas was one example of many, but one which received wider attention because it was owned by Batista himself. When the *central Washington* workers met in August 1955 to discuss the threat of 40 redundancies, the police attacked the assembly, leaving 29 workers hospitalised with gunshot and machete wounds.⁴⁰² The sugar workers responded by occupying the site hospital and began a hunger strike while female members of their families staged a sit-in, first of all in the school, then, after they had been ejected from there, occupying the church and the *ayuntamiento*. As solidarity strikes spread through the region, Béquer and Rodríguez occupied the church tower.⁴⁰³ As the confrontation escalated, the Ministry of Labour intervened, conceded to the workers and the redundancies were withdrawn.

Feelings in the industry were further inflamed by reports of corruption in the sugar workers' pension fund involving both the government and the FNTA bureaucracy, while pressure increased when the American sugar import quota was threatened with reduction following protectionist pressure from Southern US sugar farmers.⁴⁰⁴ In this atmosphere, the provincial union in Las Villas passed a resolution calling for opposition to the employers over the late start to repairs in the sugar processing plants and the threat of 10,000 redundancies, while rejecting what they saw as a return to 1950 wage levels. The FNTA *Plenaria nacional* (National Plenary Meeting) in November supported this approach and demanded a five million ton harvest, an end to wage cuts and the restoration of the previous year's 7.31% cut, along with the reinstatement of all sacked workers, pay for *super-producción*⁴⁰⁵ and derogation of Clause 4 of decree 3164

⁴⁰¹ Literally the "Dead time" as the period outside the sugar harvest period was known, when sugar workers had no income from their trade and had to subsist as best they could on other employment, subsistence farming etc.

⁴⁰² *Carta Semanal* (August 24th & September 14th 1955)

⁴⁰³ "Azucareros", *Bohemia* (September 11th 1955) p.69

⁴⁰⁴ Marquez-Sterling *Injusticia con el Trabajador del Azúcar* (1955) n.pag

Cueto *Otro Escándalo en el Retiro Azucarero* (1955) pp. sup 16-17

"Azúcar", *Bohemia* (June 26th) n.pag.

"Obreros" *Bohemia* (July 10th 1955) p.67

Casteñeda, *Azúcar: causa común de todo un pueblo* (1955) n.pag.

⁴⁰⁵ *Superproducción* is the term for the increase in production due to mechanisation. It was a common demand of Cuban workers in the face of such mechanisation that they be paid the same as before the new machinery arrived. This was strongly contested by the employers for whom mechanisation was aimed at reducing the wage bill.

which allowed employers to leave vacancies unfilled. They also raised the demand for full payment of the "*diferencial*".⁴⁰⁶

Before the start of each year's sugar harvest, it had been the agreement to pay the workers a bonus, known as the *diferencial*, calculated on the increase in the cost of living in the United States. While this might seem a bizarre reason for a bonus, it was based on the fact that a considerable proportion of the island's food was imported from North America. The *diferencial* also had a symbolic significance as it had been won by Jesus Menéndez, the legendary sugar-workers' leader, who had been murdered by an army officer on Manzanillo station in 1948, while travelling the country to organise a strike to defend the right to payment of the full *diferencial*. No *diferencial* had been paid since 1951, but the idea captured the sugar workers' imagination in 1955.⁴⁰⁷ Alfredo Menéndez, an economist in the Ministry of Sugar who was secretly a member of the PSP, used his access to the ministry's data to calculate that the *diferencial* should be 9%, although Conrado Rodríguez popularised the figure of 7.5%.⁴⁰⁸ The fact that confrontation should erupt over the *diferencial* highlights the gulf of comprehension that existed between employers and employed in the sugar industry. To the employers, the fact that the international price had dropped meant that they considered that they had a reduced ability to pay their wage bill and that a bonus which dated back to better times was unacceptable. The majority of workers on the other hand, already living in conditions of miserable poverty, felt that they were being made to bear the brunt of a crisis not of their making and thus, the fight over the *diferencial* became hugely symbolic for both sides and a strike seemed unavoidable.⁴⁰⁹

The government, with the support of the CTC bureaucracy, refused to negotiate over the sugar workers' claim for payment of the *diferencial* and the leaders of the FNTA denounced the demand as unreasonable.⁴¹⁰ Undeterred, starting on the 26th December in Las Villas province, but soon spreading nationwide, 500,000 sugar workers went on strike, while the union leadership, unable to stop the movement, tried to place themselves at its head. Then, following negotiations with Batista, the FNTA ordered a return to work on 29th December, saying that the government had agreed to their demands. Béquer and the opposition, calling themselves the *Frente Azucarero de*

⁴⁰⁶ *Carta Semanal* (November 23rd 1955)

⁴⁰⁷ "Obreros", *Bohemia* (January 1st 1956) p.68

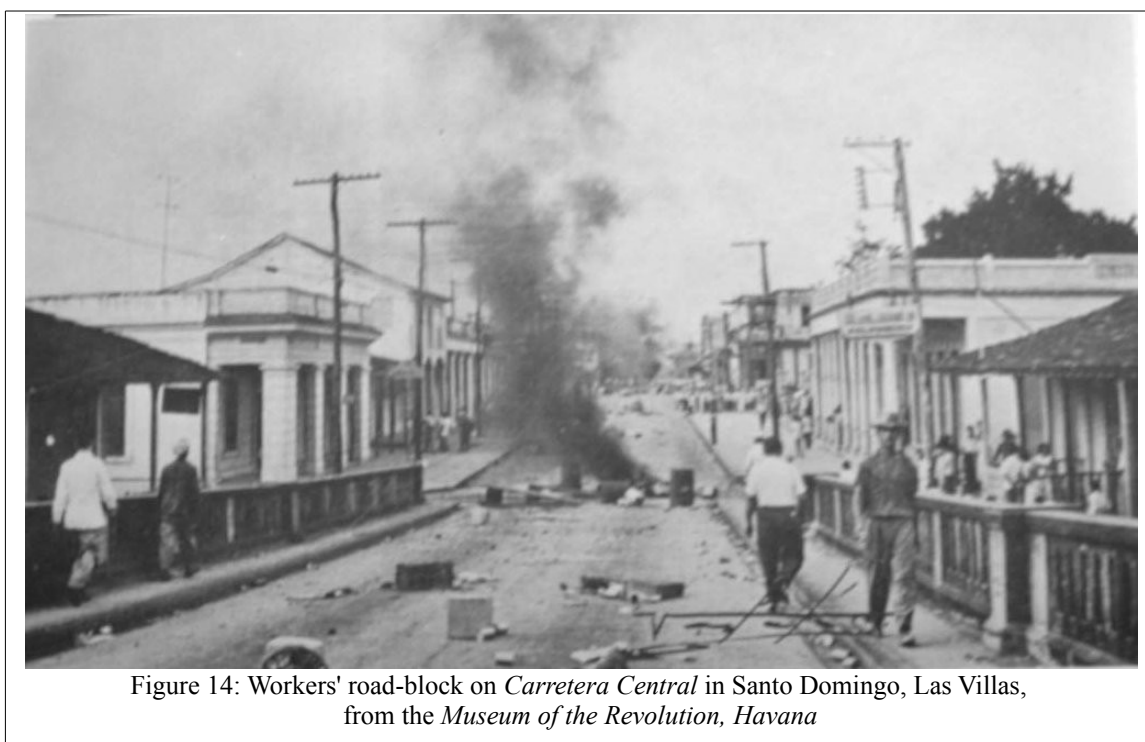
⁴⁰⁸ Interview with Alfredo Menéndez, March 2009

⁴⁰⁹ Feijoo, *Desocupación endémica* (1956) n.pag.

⁴¹⁰ Rodríguez, *La industria azucarera ha obtenido fabulosas ganancias* (1955) p.71

Acción Sindical (Sugar Workers Trade Union Action Front), called for a continuation of the struggle as the government had decreed a *diferencial* of only 4.02%, which was calculated to be worth a total of only 6 million pesos to the workers, considerably short of the 18 million pesos that it would have cost to pay the full demand which, it should be recalled, also included a demand for the reversal of the 7.31% wage cut from the previous year and compensation for *super-producción*.⁴¹¹

When faced with a level of repression only previously used to attack militant students, the sugar workers themselves turned to violence, setting up road blocks, burning cane fields and occupying town halls and city centres; actions that resulted in hundreds arrested or wounded, with several strikers being killed (Figure 14).⁴¹² In addition to a complete stoppage of the sugar industry, there were solidarity strikes on the railways and in the docks. Despite the official instruction to return to work from the CTC, normal working was not fully resumed until the 4th or 5th of January.



To get a better idea of the extent of the strike, Table 4 below records the reports to appear in the edition of *Carta Semanal* that immediately followed the end of the strike. This will inevitably be a partial account as it depended on the local presence of a PSP

⁴¹¹ "Obreros", *Bohemia* (January 8th 1956) n.pag.

Fuentes, *La huelga azucarera* (1956) n.pag.

Rojas-Blaquier, 1955, (1998) pp.68-76

⁴¹² García-Oliveres, *José Antonio Echeverría* (1979) p.258

militant to file the report and we know from other sources that there were many other actions not reported here. Nevertheless, this gives a picture of the strike rarely seen in the literature.

Table 4: Sugar Strike Reports from Carta Semanal January 11th 1956	
Pinar del Rio	
San Cristóbal, Mariel, Bahia Honda, SanDiego del Valle	<i>Ciudad-muerta</i>
Pinar del Rio city	Solidarity strikes
Havana Province	
Havana city	Solidarity strikes in the port, Hatuey brewery and other factories.
Guanagay, Artemisa	Sugar workers occupy buildings. Solidarity strikes by tobacco, shoe and bus workers
Guines	All refineries stopped. Demonstrations and partial <i>ciudad-muerta</i> . Army force shops to open. Church occupied.
Palos	Demonstration attacked by police, one worker killed
Melena del Sur	Sugar workers from <i>central Merceditas</i> demonstrate in town, traffic stopped and businesses close.
Madrugá	Running battles between sugar workers and police/army. Many arrests
San Nicolás	Workers march into town from <i>central Gímez Mena</i> . Public meeting broken up by police. 500 workers occupy church and Union Club.
Central Hershey	Complete stoppage
Santa Cruz del Norte	<i>Ciudad-muerta</i> demonstrations and road blocks. Workers occupy Yacht Club. 14 arrests, women's demonstration for their release.
Guanabacoa	Solidarity strikes by bus, shoe and garment workers
Marianao (suburb of Havana)	Solidarity from bus workers and staff of Tropicana nightclub, tile factory and quarry.
Regla	Protest strike on bus routes 21 and 25.
Matanzas Province	
Matanzas city	Solidarity strike by shop workers, printers and <i>La Rayonera & La Rex</i> textile factories.
Colón	General strike and demonstration
Unión de Reyes	Workers from central <i>Santo Domingo</i> occupy town hall
Coliseo	Joint demonstration by workers from 5 <i>centrales</i> accompanied by their families
Pedro Betancourt	Workers from <i>centrales Cuba y Dolores</i> demonstrate and call on shops to shut. Army forces shops to open. Traffic brought to standstill.
Cardenas	<i>Ciudad-muerta</i> Joint student, worker demonstration. Occupy education institute, evicted by army which patrols streets, many arrests.

Alacranes	Workers from <i>central Conchita</i> call the town to support them by ringing church bells. 1000 people join demonstration. Workers from centrales España y Tinguaro occupy <i>Casino Español</i> . Evicted violently
Las Villas (Cienfuegos, Sancti Spíritus, and Villa Clara)	" <i>En la provincia de Las Villas la casi totalidad de los municipios y las poblaciones azucareras se convirtieron en ciudades-muertas</i> ". ⁴¹³
Santa Clara	Strikers occupy the provincial CTC offices. Ejected by force and then townsfolk build roadblocks and stop circulation of traffic.
Santo Domingo	Strikers occupy church and town hall, evicted by the army. March round town. Block <i>carretera central</i> and railway line by cutting down trees and burning litter. Army forces local people forced to clear up at gun and machete point. Many arrests
La Esperanza	General strike
Ranchuelo	Factory workers, tobacco, food, commerce and construction strike in support.
Zulueta	<i>Ciudad-muerta</i>
Cruces	Sugar workers march in town. Businesses shut in solidarity, police and army patrol town attacking passers-by.
Cienfuegos city	Solidarity action by bus drivers, printers, port-workers. Demonstration by students and workers in conflict with police and army, who try to force businesses to open, but massive demonstrations cause them to shut again. Stones thrown at police and army.
Hormiguero y Portugalete	Rural Guard evict strikers form their own union local.
Palmira	Workers occupy the church, <i>Colonia Espanola</i> and Masonic lodge. Evicted by force
Aguada de Pasajeros	Workers from <i>central Covadonga</i> and <i>colonias Perseverancia y M. Victoria</i> occupy the town hall. Street demonstration in support.
Sancti Spiritus	Workers from <i>centrales Tuinicó, Natividad y Amazonas</i> march into town. Workers in <i>Compañía Nacional de Alimentos</i> , tobacco and construction workers, taxi and bus drivers in solidarity strike. Commerce shuts down. Burning tyres and rubbish block streets.
Quemados de Guines	<i>Ciudad-muerta</i> . Electricity cut off. <i>Tercio Táctico</i> from Sancti Spiritus reinforces local military post. Many workers injured, one killed. Imposing demonstration at his funeral.
Sagua la Grande	Town paralysed. Church occupied and bells rung to attract support. Evicted at gunpoint. Train derailed to block the main road. Several injured, two seriously. Surrounding area also paralysed
Placetas, Cabaiguan, Guayos, Zaza del Medio, Trinidad	<i>Ciudades-muertas</i> and demonstrations.
Fomento	<i>Ciudad-muerta</i> . Army open fire on demonstration, many wounded.

⁴¹³ Carta Semanal (January 11th 1956)

Yaguajay, Narcisa and Mayajigua	<i>Ciudades-muertas</i> and demonstrations.
Camagüey Province	
Camagüey City	Ten minute strike stops city completely
Moron	General strike, including bus and train crews which cuts town off. Demonstrations and fights with police, many wounded and arrests. Strikebreaking bus burnt as were several railway bridges.
Florida	Joint strike committee from <i>centrales Florida, Estrella, Céspedes y Agramonte</i> organise actions. Summon towns-people by church bells, police and army open fire. Stones thrown. Many arrests, but local military chief forced to parley with strikers.
Ciego de Avila	5000 demonstrate. Shops that had remained open, forcibly shut by mass action. Traffic stopped, students and workers occupy financial centre and education institute, evicted by army at gunpoint. Children injured, one mother attacks soldiers with a knife. Roads to <i>centrales Stewart, Baragüa y Algodones</i> blocked. Railway blocked
Esmeralda, Jaronu, Cunagua, Vertientes, Francisco, Elia, Siboney, Najasa, Minas	Strike complete and all shops and businesses closed.
Santa Cruz del Sur	Dockers refuse to load sugar and <i>ciudad-muerta</i>
Nuevitas	Mujalista officials order loading of sugar, but railway workers refuse to transport it.
Oriente	
Santiago de Cuba	Solidarity meetings, particularly in port and Bacardi
Guantánamo	Stoppage complete in the area, students join workers demonstration. Occupation of town hall and education institute
Manzanillo	Stoppage complete in the area. Pílon dockers strike rather than load sugar. Sugar workers tour factories and a mass meeting agrees a <i>ciudad-muerta</i>
Bayamo	Refineries in the region stop repairs. Marches in the sugar villages of the area, joined by other workers.
Puerto Padre	<i>Ciudad-muerta</i> . <i>Centrales Chaparra y Delicias</i> stop work. Dockers of Cayo Juan Claro stop loading sugar.
Baguano y Tacajo	Stoppage complete. Army try to force dockers to load sugar at gunpoint, but they resist and prevent further loading by derailing a train between the warehouse and the port.
Boston, Preston, Maceo, San German, Cacocum, Manati, Jobabo, Tanamo	Stop repairs to machinery in preparation for the harvest

The picture which emerges from this account is of a widespread strike with extremely active and militant rank and file participation. The start of the strike in Las Villas province is clearly the result of a decision of the local leadership based around Béquer and Rodríguez. The speed with which the strike spread to the rest of the industry, despite the lack of any lead from the official union leadership, shows that there was a well established network of militants capable of acting independently. The local industrial action during the previous year, described in Table 2 above, would have played a part in reinforcing existing links and establishing new ones. Once the strike started, the level of solidarity coming from other workers, particularly dock and railway workers, is impressive. Where normal peaceful picketing proved ineffective in the face of police and army aggression, there was no hesitation in resorting to sabotage, such as bridge burning and train derailment. Street demonstrations, road blocks and the occupation of public buildings and town squares were also a common feature. Finally, where they were able, workers engaged in street fights with government forces, leaving many injured and several dead. It is hard to imagine what more the sugar workers could have done, within the bounds of "normal" trade union activity; indeed they had already pushed the boundaries of accepted trade union practice beyond its limits. Yet they were still defeated and it must be seen as a defeat, despite assertions to the contrary in some of the literature,⁴¹⁴ not just because they only got 4.02% rather than the 7.5% *diferencial* that they were demanding, but also, it must not be forgotten, because they did not succeed in restoring the 7.31% pay cut of the previous year, no *superproducción* was paid, the *zafra* was not extended to 5 million tons and the full labour force was not re-employed. Conrado Béquer was quite clear that they had not won and blamed Mujal for what he described as a sell out.⁴¹⁵

The violence used by the state against strikers forged a bond of solidarity between workers and students as they realised they had a common enemy. The FEU repaid the solidarity they had received on 14th December by sending student organisers out into the sugar fields to help the strikers. In many towns students joined demonstrations in large numbers and occupied their colleges. The support that they showed in the sugar strike gave the FEU enormous credibility amongst workers and the revolutionary nationalist politics of the student activists gained a greater working class following. When a section of the FNTA leadership tried to openly organise against what they saw

⁴¹⁴ eg. Massón Sena, *Proyectos y accionar del Partido Socialista Popular entre 1952 y 1958* (2009) p.233

⁴¹⁵ Bequer Díaz, *Vendió Mujal las demandas azucareras* (1956) p.61

as a betrayal, they were disciplined by the CTC bureaucracy and turned again to the FEU for help.

The looming split in the CTC became a reality as Béquer and Rodríguez, along with some other officials who had supported the strike, were removed from the FNTA executive and some provincial leaders were expelled, with the CTC using the police to enforce the decision. New officials were imposed by the Ministry of Labour to replace those expelled, but in Las Villas and Camagüey no local sugar workers were available, so outsiders had to be used. Having been barred from their own building by the police, the anti-*mujalista* opposition in the FNTA met in the parliament building, using Conrado Rodríguez's position as congressional deputy to secure a meeting room. The meeting was attended by a clear majority of the FNTA executive. They declared themselves the real leadership of the union and proposed to go to court to establish it; a course of action which came to nothing.⁴¹⁶ Attempts to form a breakaway sugar workers union with the help of the FEU were equally unsuccessful as the Ministry of Labour and the *mujalista* trade union bureaucracy worked together using the intervention procedures to isolate the opposition.⁴¹⁷

The news magazine *Bohemia* argued at the time that the *diferencial* represented much more than the money, but was rather a question of workers' rights and social justice.⁴¹⁸ Although it was several days before normal working was fully resumed, the final outcome was a success for the government, even though many employers did not see it that way, expecting the complete smashing of all resistance. Thus the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), having hoped in February 1955 that Batista "would override labour opposition", expressed disappointment in February of the following year saying: "A strike of 500,000 sugar and dock workers was settled in the short term by a government decision in favour of the workers"⁴¹⁹. It is significant that the EIU includes dock workers in the strike as, completely unofficially, they involved themselves in the sugar dispute, taking advantage of an opportunity to use their solidarity action to further their campaign against bulk loading.

⁴¹⁶ Cueto, *El pleito sindical* (1956) n.pag.

"Obreros", *Bohemia* (January 15th 1956) p.61

⁴¹⁷ "Obreros", *Bohemia* (January 22nd 1956) pp.sup11-13

⁴¹⁸ Valdespino, *Más allá del diferencial* (1956) p.55

⁴¹⁹ EIU, *Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico*, no.9 (1955) n.pag. & no.13 (1956) n.pag.

Ports

The Truslow report had recommended that sugar be bulk loaded (*azúcar a granel*).⁴²⁰ In Cuba at this time, the sugar was placed in jute sacks at the refinery, shipped on trains to the port, then, still in sacks, manhandled using cranes and conveyor belts into warehouses to await the equally labour intensive



Figure 15: Manual Loading of Sugar, from *Carteles* (February 13th 1955) pp.46-48

transfer into the holds of cargo ships (Figure 15). The technology had long been developed to mechanise this process so that the sugar could be poured directly into the bulk carrier ship's hold, but its use was highly controversial as it would have resulted in large scale job losses. The economic importance of bulk loading can be seen from the estimation that manual loading normally proceeded at a rate of 800 tons per day, while direct bulk loading could increase that to 400 tons per hour, with half the number of stevedores employed.⁴²¹ The dock-workers were bitterly opposed to this measure and, while the previous government of Carlos Prío had issued decree number 501 authorising the loading of *azúcar a granel*, they had not dared to enforce it.⁴²² Batista confirmed the decree early in his rule, but then immediately deferred its application, allowing him to set the agenda for full implementation.

Having decided that its priority after winning the 1954 elections was the financial difficulties of the railway companies and the sugar industry, the government did not attempt to impose bulk loading on the dock-workers immediately, although it did start to prepare the ground. The dockers were under no illusions about the forthcoming attack and, as early as May 1954, *Carta Semanal* reported on mass meetings of dockers in Nuevitas, Santiago, Cienfuegos and Matanzas, which mandated their delegates to the forthcoming national congress of their union, the *Federación de Obreros Marítimos*

⁴²⁰ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) pp.391-402

⁴²¹ Menéndez, *Interview* (2009)

⁴²² Rojas-Blaquier, *El mujalismo en el movimiento obrero cubano* (1983) p.84

Nacional (FOMN - National Federation of Maritime Workers), to vote against accepting *azúcar a granel*.⁴²³ When the conference actually opened at the end of January 1955 it became obvious to Gilberto Goliath, the *mujalista* general secretary of the FOMN, that, despite having persuaded a significant number of delegates to ignore their mandate and to vote in favour of bulk loading, there was still a majority who would vote against.⁴²⁴ Mujal, who chaired the conference personally, therefore postponed the decision until he was able to pack the hall with extra, unelected delegates.⁴²⁵ Despite angry protests from the legitimately elected delegates opposed to the measure, it was passed by 143 votes to 78.⁴²⁶ As a result of this official acceptance, Batista issued a decree regulating loading and unloading of primary materials, but he was careful not to provoke the dockers further at this stage by specifying reductions in manning levels.⁴²⁷ It was one thing to have a formal union policy which accepted bulk loading, it was another to enforce its acceptance at local level and following an unofficial meeting, the opposition delegates returned to their ports committed to organising resistance locally.

When a local union organisation appeared to be escaping from Mujal's control, the Ministry of Labour could "intervene", an expression meaning that they would take over the organisation, at police gun-point if necessary, and impose a safe bureaucrat to run it. This happened in Santiago in 1955, when the dockworkers, still under the leadership of the communist Juan Taquechel, started to organise against the threat of bulk loading and held some protest strikes⁴²⁸. The Ministry intervened, although with only limited success as the dockers still managed to hold their mass meetings.⁴²⁹

Tension was raised further when, in January 1955, the British Ambassador passed a note to the government demanding that, in future, all sugar exported to England must be bulk loaded.⁴³⁰ This was considered particularly provocative as Britain held large reserves and was not intending to buy its usual amount of Cuban sugar that year. Following the British demand, the port-workers of Nuevitas set the lead in resisting

⁴²³ *Carta Semanal* (May 22nd 1954)

⁴²⁴ *Carta Semanal* (February 9th 1955)

⁴²⁵ *El Mundo* (30th January 1955)

⁴²⁶ *Carta Semanal* (February 16th 1955)

El Mundo (30th January 1955)

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 955 (March 31, 1955) *Labor Developments*

⁴²⁷ *Carta Semanal* (March 16th 1955)

⁴²⁸ Fuente, *A Nation for All* (2001) p.242

Carta Semanal (March 30th 1954)

⁴²⁹ *Carta Semanal* (April 6th 1955)

⁴³⁰ "Azucar", *Bohemia* (January 23rd 1955) n.pag.

El Mundo (7th January 1955)

embarques a granel, by refusing to bulk load a German ship, "Parnas", bound for England. Army strike-breakers were used to load instead.⁴³¹ Faced with this threat and the undemocratic nature of the official union's acceptance, 78 local unions set up a *Comité nacional contra los embarques a granel* (National Committee against Bulk Loading) to organise opposition.⁴³² However, the government had other, more immediate priorities and further delayed attempting to implement the decree.

Bulk loading of sugar finally reached 11% of exports by 1957, increasing to 25% by 1958.⁴³³ However, this was still not mechanised bulk loading; sugar cargoes were ferried out in lighters, still in their sacks and then dumped out of the bags into the hold of a ship lying offshore.⁴³⁴ The only advantage of this for the port employers was that they could thereby comply with the importing countries' requirements; apart from a small economy from the reuse of sacks, they saved no money at the Cuban end of the business. The first mechanised bulk sugar loading facilities were not established until the early 1970s with the inauguration of the new dock and warehousing arrangements in Guayabal and Matanzas, followed later by Cienfuegos.⁴³⁵

Tobacco

The ports were not the only sector in which the Batista government's productivity offensive was less than successful; they were equally unable to force through mechanisation of the home cigar market. In order to understand developments in the tobacco industry in 1955, it is necessary to return to the late 1940s.

Before the 1952 coup, the major cigar companies were unable to impose the mechanisation of the internal market, despite the fact that Mujal and the Ministry of Labour had removed the traditional communist leadership from official control of the tobacco workers' trade union federation. It appeared that sterner measures of repression than those available to the Prío government would be necessary to defeat a determined and well organised group of workers who commanded considerable popular support.

Cuban cigar exports had fallen from 256 million per year in 1906 to only 21 million in 1949 and the Truslow report argued that the only way to reverse this decline

⁴³¹ *Carta Semanal* (April 13th 1955)

⁴³² *Carta Semanal* (February 23rd 1955)

⁴³³ US Department of Agriculture, *Sugar Reports* (1959)

⁴³⁴ Hagelberg, *Bulk loading of sugar in Cuba* (2009)

⁴³⁵ Castro, *Speech at the Dedication of a Bulk Sugar Terminal* (1978)

was by mechanisation.⁴³⁶ Such was the obvious crisis that trade unionists in the tobacco industry had accepted the argument for mechanisation for export, but were determined to resist mechanisation of the greatly expanded internal market, as well as demanding financial compensation for those displaced by machinery. This policy was formally agreed at a conference of the *Federación Tabacalera Nacional* (FTN National Federation of Tobacco Workers) in February 1948 and a campaign to defend hand rolling for domestic consumption was launched at a mass meeting in the *Parque Central* in Havana, addressed by Lazaro Peña, the recently deposed communist ex-general secretary of the CTC, who had himself been a tobacco worker. Jean Stubbs describes a situation where communists had a significant base in the tobacco industry and had strongly resisted intervention by the Ministry of Labour aimed at imposing *mujalista* officials. This had come to violence on many occasions, with gangsters linked to the *Auténtico* party operating inside the factories with the consent of the owners and with the intention of intimidating and demoralising the workers. Miguel Fernández Roig, union representative in *La Corona* factory and an established leader of the Havana cigar makers, was murdered by an *Auténtico* gunman, who escaped with the aid of the police.⁴³⁷ This campaign of violence was, however, only partially successful and the tobacco industry was one of the sectors where the PSP was to maintain a significant presence throughout the 1950s. Later attempts to intervene in the tobacco unions in Las Villas and Oriente in 1956 would be met with a series of strikes.⁴³⁸

In November 1948, José Diaz Ortega, a member of congress from Pinar del Rio, proposed a motion in parliament which would have legalised the complete mechanisation of cigar manufacture, both for export and for internal consumption. However, this was rejected following energetic lobbying by an alliance of tobacco workers and the owners of small factories who could not afford the investment required to mechanise.⁴³⁹ Despite this rejection, in March 1950, the government of Carlos Prío, with the acquiescence of the national union leadership, now firmly in the hands of the *mujalistas*, issued decree number 1073, which authorised mechanisation of cigar-making for export and for 20% of the home market, along with compensation of 40 pesos per month for those workers who lost their jobs as a direct result of the

⁴³⁶ Truslow, *Report on Cuba* (1951) pp.856-864

⁴³⁷ Stubbs, *Tobacco on the Periphery* (1985) p.153

⁴³⁸ *Carta Semanal* (February 15th&29th, March 21st 1956)

⁴³⁹ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 551 (1950) *Labor Notes on Havana*

measure.⁴⁴⁰ Given the fact that over a third of Havana's cigar-makers were already unemployed at this time and would therefore not have received the compensation, this last measure fell well short of the workers' demands.

Despite the purge of most of the tobacco workers' union organisations by this time, the *unitarios*, as the communists and their allies in the workers' movement were known, still commanded considerable loyalty amongst rank and file tobacco workers and they set about organising a united front with the smaller employers, who stood to lose business to the large cigar companies as they could not afford the expensive new machinery.⁴⁴¹ Opposition was already strong in Las Villas, so a group of experienced *unitario* organisers went to Pinar del Rio to stiffen resistance there.⁴⁴² Feelings were running so high in Las Villas that the newly imposed union leadership was forced to act and in March 1951 a joint committee was set up to co-ordinate the struggle against decree 1073. By the end of June 1951, the joint committee had sufficient strength to call a strike for the 2nd July. This became a general stoppage, with many towns in Las Villas organising *ciudades-muertas*. In Cabaiguán the town hall was occupied and there was a massive demonstration of support for the tobacco workers, despite considerable violent police activity. Both Jean Stubbs and Ramón Pérez Linares describe how, in the province of Las Villas generally the forces of order were in some danger of losing control of the situation with the *Carretera Central* and the main railway line blocked in many places. The mayors of 31 towns in Las Villas went to Havana to lobby President Prío and a 48 hour truce was agreed. As a result of further negotiations, decree 2893 withdrew permission for mechanisation of cigars aimed at the home market.⁴⁴³

Several points of interest emerge from this dispute, firstly the fact that the Prío government's purges of the unions were not sufficient in themselves to ensure that productivity measures such as mechanisation could be introduced. The new, *mujalista* leadership was still vulnerable to pressure from the rank and file, particularly in areas where the traditional communist leaders and their allies retained support and respect despite being ousted from office. This lesson would not be lost on the Batista regime in the years following the coup and the compulsory check-off of union dues, the *cuota*

⁴⁴⁰ Pérez-Linares, *La agro-manufactura tabacalera de Las Villas* (2005) p.95-96
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 885 (1950) *Cuban Labor Developments*

⁴⁴¹ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1138 (1950) *Communist Sponsored Labor Meeting Broken Up By Police*

⁴⁴² Romero-Ríos, *Aspectos fundamentales de la clase obrera en Pinar del Río* (1986) pp.104-7

⁴⁴³ Stubbs, *The Cuban Tobacco Industry* (1975) pp.280-1
Pérez-Linares, *La agro-manufactura tabacalera* (2005) pp.96-101

sindical obligatoria, combined with greater police support for interventions, would reduce the bureaucracy's dependence on the rank and file. At this stage, the purges and "interventions" were only a partial success because, as soon as halfway democratic elections were allowed, *unitarios* were frequently re-elected. The success of the communist party's tactics, which took the form of an alliance between workers and businessmen who were opposed to the monopolising tendencies of the bigger companies, ensured their continuing popularity amongst tobacco workers. Secondly, although there had been a certain amount of fighting between demonstrators and police on July 2nd 1951, this had not intimidated the strikers and their allies. The Batista regime would remedy this by making sure that, wherever needed, its use of repressive force would not stop at the bounds normally accepted in a democratic society, but would wound, kill, torture and arbitrarily arrest where necessary, using the army to "aid the civil power" with fixed bayonets and live rounds.

Following the coup, the eight large companies which had already mechanised their export business, sought to extend their use of the new machines to the home trade. The opening shots of the campaign were a short strike in Havana on 18th May 1953 and the setting up of a *Comité de lucha contra la mecanización* (Committee to fight mechanisation) in Santa Clara. The government, in response to pressure from the larger companies, issued decree 895 which authorised the Minister of Agriculture to gauge the state of opinion on the subject of extending mechanisation, which he was to do by consulting the official unions. Unfortunately for the supporters of mechanisation, anti-*mujalista* forces in the union were still in place in Las Villas and, at the *V Congreso Tabacalero Nacional* on the 20th and 21st June 1953, had enough delegates to sway the conference to opposition.⁴⁴⁴ Indeed Mujal was never able to exert the level of control over the FTN that he managed in most other organisations, in part because of the ineptitude and greed of those few leading tobacco trade unionists who supported his project, with the result that even anti-communist trade unionists were disgusted.⁴⁴⁵

The matter of mechanisation then lay on the table until late 1955 when the large companies announced the setting up of a "persuasive" fund.⁴⁴⁶ Two senators, Manuel Benítez and Ernesto Pérez Carrillo, as well as a congressman, José Luis Guerra Cabrera,

⁴⁴⁴ Pérez-Linares, *La lucha de los tabacaleros villareños contra la mecanización* (2003) pp.145-6

⁴⁴⁵ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 19 (July 3, 1953) *Six Communists selected to the Executive Committee of the Tobacco Workers Federation*
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 434 (Oct. 25, 1954) *Labor Developments*
"Obreros", *Bohemia* (October 4th 1954) p.82

⁴⁴⁶ "un fondo para utilizar con carácter 'persuasivo'"

independently proposed laws which would legalise mechanisation, while the workers from H. Upman and Partagas staged demonstrations outside the building. The matter was more complicated than most productivity arrangements for several reasons. Mechanisation of the export trade had not increased sales or reduced prices, merely increased profits for those firms which could afford the necessary capital outlay. Any extension of mechanisation would not only bring redundancies to the mechanising factories, but would be likely to result in a concentration of the industry into the hands of a few monopolies, mainly based in Havana, reducing employment opportunities in the provinces. The proposed compensation for displaced workers and ruined small businesses was to be a charge on the state, thereby using the public purse to effectively subsidise a few large companies.⁴⁴⁷ This reactivated the alliance between the smaller producers and the *unitario* trade unionists in Las Villas, who relaunched the *Comité de lucha contra la mecanización*. With the sugar workers' dispute now firmly on the horizon, the government had enough to deal with and the attempt to introduce mechanisation was postponed. There was a half-hearted attempt to return to the matter in the new year of 1956, with Ministry of Labour interventions in some of the most intransigent local unions which resulted in strikes, most notably in Zaza del Medion in February 1956, Bayamo in early March and the whole province of Las Villas later that same month.⁴⁴⁸ Thereafter, with the exception of a public meeting in the Teatro La Caridad in Santa Clara in 1957, where Batista himself addressed interested parties to try to persuade them to accept *semi-mecanización*, the matter was quietly dropped.⁴⁴⁹

Conclusion

The history of Cuba's port and tobacco workers' resistance to the government and employers' attempts to increase productivity poses the question: "Why did the attempt to impose mechanisation on both bulk loading of sugar and cigar production for the home market fail, when the government/employers' productivity drive was relatively successful in most other industries?" It is possible to use brute force and corruption to reduce the wage bill in industries such as sugar production, which rely largely on unskilled manual labour, or the railways, which were already mechanised. In both of these cases it was merely a question of intensifying workloads and paying lower wages. The problem with the docks was that the major productivity measure proposed by

⁴⁴⁷ "Tabaco", *Bohemia* (October 16th 1955) n.pag. & *Carta Semanal* (November 23rd 1955)

⁴⁴⁸ *Carta Semanal* (February 15th & 29th, March 7th & 21st, April 11th 1956)

⁴⁴⁹ Pérez Linares, *La agro-manufactura tabacalera de Las Villas* (2005) p.106

Truslow, bulk loading of sugar, required considerable investment in new machinery. Before employers were prepared to make such investment, they had be reasonably confident that they could make the workers use the new equipment. An earlier attempt to introduce bulk loading of cement had proved a costly failure.⁴⁵⁰

In 1950, the *El Mariel* cement company had paid \$100,000 to install bulk unloading equipment in the port of Havana. The Havana dockers used their industrial muscle to force the company to employ as many stevedores on the bulk discharge as would have been required for manual unloading. The company dismantled the equipment and returned to the previous practice.⁴⁵¹ Given this experience, the port employers required a firm guarantee that their employees would operate any new equipment they installed for bulk loading of sugar; neither Batista nor Mujal could give such a guarantee. This structural difficulty for the employers' was compounded by the dockers own agency; their use of sympathy strikes.

Ever since James Connolly wrote a description of the effectiveness of sympathy strike action in the British seaman's strike of 1911, there has been considerable discussion in the literature on this subject.⁴⁵² Apparently disinterested solidarity action also serves as a warning to the sympathy-strikers' own employer of a general willingness to take industrial action. It also builds up a "debt of solidarity" that enables them to call for a return solidarity in the future. An example of this occurs at the end of 1955, when 34 Santiago dockers were dismissed for "communism", the Bacardí workers, themselves disputing attempts to mechanise rum production, held an assembly to protest and set up a committee to raise funds to support the sacked workers.⁴⁵³ Such solidarity action can be used as a more or less open threat during negotiations that serves to intimidate the employer and thereby reduce his determination to proceed with measures that will clearly be unpopular.

⁴⁵⁰ Chávez Alvarez, *Matanzas de rojo y negro* (2007) p.34

⁴⁵¹ Portell Vilá, *El puerto más caro del Mundo* (1950) p.45,112
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 75 (1950) *Labor Notes on Havana*

⁴⁵² Connolly, *Old Wine in New Bottles* (1914)
Trudell, *The Hidden History of US Radicalism* (2006),
Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism* (2008),
McIlroy et al., *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism* (2007),
McIlroy et al., *The Post-War Compromise* (2007),
Beynon, *Working for Ford* (1973)

⁴⁵³ *Prensa Universal* (December 29th 1955) p.2 - cited in Coya, *El movimiento obrero en Santiago de Cuba* (1982) p.25

Similarly, the failure to mechanise the home cigar market equally resulted from a combination of structure and agency. The problem of finding sufficient capital to purchase expensive new machinery was more acute in the cigar industry and mechanisation would inevitably lead to a few large monopolies dominating the market. This meant that the employers were divided on the measure. Such a split in the employers' ranks was then exploited by the tobacco workers, whose unofficial leaders, strongly influenced by communist party politics, found a group of employers who they could argue were "patriotic" and with whom they shared a common interest.

This all indicates that an authoritarian regime can be quite successful in forcing through cuts in wages and enforcing redundancies, but finds it much more difficult to impose the use of new machinery. The PSP, having given a successful lead in the docks and tobacco industry would continue to maintain an influential position in these sectors, but that the more militaristic approach of the M-26-7 would start to have a greater appeal for those workers who had been defeated in the class struggles of 1955. Thus, the success of the *Marianao tejaleros* dispute, in which communist militants played a leading role, further convinced the PSP of the soundness of their strategy which they defined by the slogans "Unity" and "Mass Struggle".

On the other hand, the workers of *La Rayonera* textile factory, whose dispute was described above, drew entirely different lessons from their dispute, which had demonstrated the collaborationist role of the official bureaucracy and their inability to resist state violence unaided. The provincial leader of the textile workers' union, Julián Alemán, was already a member of the recently formed *Sección Obrera* of the M-26-7, while Aldo Santamaría, a member of the national leadership of the M-26-7, was also employed in the industry in Matanzas. The M-26-7 was able to recruit one of the earliest branches of its *Sección Obrera* in the factory, which would go on to provide significant support for the revolutionary process and to organise solidarity with the sugar workers during their strike.⁴⁵⁴ Other strike leaders also joined the M-26-7 after the defeat of their disputes. José María de la Aguilera of the Havana bank workers joined sometime during 1956 having been purged from the official structure of the bank workers' union by the process known as "*intervención*", which is discussed more fully in the next chapter. Aguilera had been a member of the *Ortodoxos* and as such had always been considered an opponent by Mujal. The sugar workers' leader Conrado Béquer on the other hand

⁴⁵⁴ García-Pérez, *Insurrección y revolución* (2006) pp.105-6

represented a split in the CTC bureaucracy. Having come from the *Auténtico* party, he had originally been part of the *mujalista* machine, but as the situation developed and became more polarised, he had to choose between the bureaucracy and the rank and file. He chose the latter and also joined the M-26-7, although it is difficult to be precise as he operated above ground for as long as possible. Thus the emerging leadership of the 26th July Movement's *Sección Obrera* came from different backgrounds but were all products of the defeats their sectors suffered in 1955-6. Of all these disputes, the sugar workers is obviously the most significant. As the most important sector of the economy, winning the battle in the sugar industry was crucial to the government's productivity offensive and the relative success heartened Batista and his supporters. However, their celebrations were premature as many sugar workers considered that they may have lost a battle, but not the war.

Marrifeli Pérez Stable argues that the confrontations described in this chapter destroyed many illusions and convinced a significant minority of workers that there was no longer any reformist solution to their problems.⁴⁵⁵ The year 1955 marked an important shift in the balance of power and economic advantage in Cuba. Previously, despite the corrupt leadership of their trade unions, the majority of workers had seen their wages and conditions remain more or less stable and had not felt particularly troubled by the close relationship between their official leaders and the government; indeed, many probably welcomed it, as such arrangements with previous governments had become the norm in trade union practice. The employers' productivity offensive which followed the fraudulent 1954 elections marked a turning point. The trade union bureaucracy now proved to be an obstacle, rather than a support, as the government moved to implement the philosophy behind the Truslow report.

It has been argued earlier that it would have been difficult to implement the Truslow report under a democratic regime. This is partly because, as the workers started to feel betrayed by their leadership, it became increasingly necessary for the Ministry of Labour to intervene in order to prevent the ousting of the *mujalista* officials, which would have undoubtedly happened if democratic elections had been permitted. When workers attempted to fight despite their official leaders, they were confronted by the full force of the state.

⁴⁵⁵ Pérez-Stable, *Cuban Revolution* (1999) p.55

On the 30th December 1955, the train crews on the Ciego de Avila to Morón line were on strike in solidarity with the sugar workers. The army, with fixed bayonets, surrounded the workshop in Morón and the officer said: "Either the engines go out or there will be a bloodbath!" This broke the strike.⁴⁵⁶ Unarmed workers, whose trade unions are doing all they can to obstruct any generalisation of solidarity, cannot fight such a threat using traditional trade union methods. There were, however, small groups of militants who emerged from all of these defeated strikes who looked for new methods of defending their interests, the most energetic of which were some railwaymen from Guantánamo.

⁴⁵⁶ *¡Las máquinas salen, aunque sean bañadas con sangre!* - Pérez-García et al., *Invierno Caliente* (2008) p.105

Chapter 4. Workers take stock

In the wake of the British miners' strike of 1984, Chris Harman argued:

There are two sorts of defeats workers can suffer. There are defeats like that which followed the 1848 revolution, the Paris Commune, the taking of power by Hitler in Germany, or the Pinochet coup in Chile. These set the workers' movement back years, or even decades, and when it re-emerges it has to start virtually from scratch.

There are other defeats which are best seen as interludes between battles. These are particularly prevalent after a period of working class advance which has lost momentum. Then the employing class goes on to the offensive against one section of the class after another, trying to wrest back what it lost not so long before.⁴⁵⁷

This chapter argues that defeats of the workers in the majority of the class struggles of 1955-6 are much closer to "interludes between battles" and that the workers' movement did not have to "start virtually from scratch". Rather, there was a pause for reassessment during which new tactics emerged to deal with the dictatorship and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy. There were two very different responses to the challenges facing the working class opposition movement, on the one hand the approach of the July 26th Movement that was aimed at instigating an armed insurrection and, on the other hand, that of the Popular Socialist Party, based on attempts to generate mass action. The chapter examines in some detail the July 26th Movement in Guantánamo, as the railway workers in this area not only had the most militant tradition in Cuba, but would go on to make an important contribution to the revolution as they developed the concept of "*Sindicalismo beligerante*" (trade unionism on a war footing). This was the combination of mass action with sabotage, an approach that led telephone workers to cut phone lines, sugar workers to burn fields and railway workers to derail strikebreaking trains during strikes. In order to achieve this in conditions imposed by a dictatorship, they also pioneered a clandestine cell structure which would later be extended nationwide to form the basic organisational model of the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*.

The PSP national leadership profoundly disagreed with the approach of the M-26-7, which they criticised as being inimical to "*la lucha de masas*" (mass struggle), by which they meant widespread strike action, combined with demonstrations and other protests. In PSP terminology, the tactic of "mass struggle" was counterposed to armed

⁴⁵⁷ Harman, *1984 and the Shape of Things to Come* (1985) pp115-116

resistance and sabotage which was decried as "putchism" or "individual terrorism". In practical terms, the communist approach was to build their front organisation, the *Comité Nacional de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras y por la Democratización de la CTC* (CNDDO - National committee for the defence of workers' demands and for the democratisation of the CTC) and to argue for a general strike to bring down Batista in the same manner as the August 1933 strike had removed President Gerardo Machado. However, despite their criticism of the M-26-7, the PSP leadership had to recognise its growing influence.

One particular aspect of the class struggle during 1956 and early 1957 assumed increasing importance; the growing involvement of the state in the internal affairs of the unions. The "intervention" procedures used by Mujal and the Ministry of Labour became a significant arena of industrial tension and raised the question of control of the unions. The continued necessity for such external intervention in the trade unions at local and national level shows the increasing difficulty faced by the *mujalistas* in the battle to win the hearts and minds of the organised working class. Chapter 1 spoke of the three major political tendencies in the Cuban labour movement, the M-26-7, the PSP and *mujalismo*. The necessity for more government intervention is an indication of a shift in the balance of forces away from the bureaucracy.

Much of the historiography of the insurrection, with the notable exception of Bonachea and San Martín, starts with the landing of Fidel Castro in the *Granma* at the end of 1956.⁴⁵⁸ This approach tends to neglect the role of the underground resistance on the island, who had already established a network capable of sustaining the newly arrived nucleus of the rebel army, as well as conducting armed actions and sabotage. As part of this underground, the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera* in Guantánamo was able to produce significant strike action in support of the armed uprising in Santiago at the time of Fidel Castro's arrival in the *Granma* at the end of 1956. By this time, communists in Santiago had a much closer relationship with the local *fidelistas* than with the national leadership of their own party. This would lead to the Santiago PSP calling strikes in support of the M-26-7 armed action, in defiance of direct instructions from their leadership in Havana; an example of the regional differences which play such an important role in understanding the course of the insurrection. It also shows that the political convergence between the PSP and the M-26-7, which would culminate in the

⁴⁵⁸ Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection* (1974)

formation of the *Partido Comunista de Cuba* (PCC or Communist Party of Cuba) in 1965, had its roots in the working class movement in eastern Cuba.

This chapter looks in detail at the changes that occurred in the labour movement following the period of intense activity of 1955. It traces a relative lull in industrial and political activity, during which the various forces within organised labour regrouped and reorganised; the M-26-7 starting the work of building their *Sección Obrera*, the PSP building the CDDOs and the union bureaucracy attempting to shore up its position with the support of state. These developments are important in gaining an understanding of how organised labour responded to the next major turning point in the history of the Cuban insurrection, the *Granma* landing.

Guantánamo and the 26th July Movement

The city of Guantánamo and its surrounding region produced some outstanding workers' leaders who would go on to assume an important role in the insurrectionary phase of the revolution. The following section examines the responses of these militants to the defeats of the bank, railway and sugar workers' strikes of 1955. A group of railwaymen, who had many years of experience in industrial struggles, were attracted to the M-26-7 because they felt the need for armed support when faced with the failure of conventional trade union tactics in the face of a brutal dictatorship. This group would develop new tactics and methods of organisation that were more suitable to the context in which they found themselves and their approach would go on to be adopted by the M-26-7 nationally following their important contribution to the uprising of 30th November 1956.

Upon his release from prison in May 1955 following an extensive amnesty campaign, Fidel Castro founded the *Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio*, named after the date of the attack on the Moncada barracks. This was a formalisation and restructuring of a relatively extensive existing network of anti-Batista individuals and small groups, some of whom had been loosely cooperating since 1953.⁴⁵⁹ Finding himself unable to operate in Cuba because of government surveillance as well as being the target of government death squads, Castro almost immediately left for Mexico to prepare for the armed rebellion. He left Frank País (Figure 16), who was leader of one of the pre-existing constituent groups, the Santiago based *Acción Nacional*

⁴⁵⁹ Espín, *Déborah* (1975) p.67-8

Revolucionaria (ANR - National Revolutionary Action), to co-ordinate support for his return. As *Jefe de Acción* (Action Chief) for the province of Oriente, Frank País's work consisted of gathering and storing arms, searching for possible landing sites for the return, producing propaganda material and building the organisation.⁴⁶⁰ Shortly after the defeat of the *FFCC Consolidados* strike in September 1955, Frank País visited Guantánamo with a view to extending the organisation to this important centre of working class militancy. For those railwaymen in Guantánamo who wished to reorganise after their recent defeat, the M-26-7's approach had great appeal in that it placed the general strike at the very centre of its tactics, while also seeing the need to combine that strike with an armed insurrection.⁴⁶¹ Frank País was introduced by a local student, Enrique Soto, to Octavio Luit, a railwayman, who agreed to form a branch of the revolutionary organisation in the city, an endeavour to which he quickly recruited another railway worker, the same Níco Torres mentioned in the previous chapter.⁴⁶²



Figure 16: Frank País, from the *Museum of the Revolution*

It will always be difficult for historians to write about successful clandestine opposition to a dictatorial regime, as one of the prerequisites for such success is to leave as few traces as possible. Thus, for example, the only contemporary public reference to Níco Torres from this period that has so far come to light is one report in the Guantánamo local paper that Torres and two others had been arrested by the SIM, the regime's military intelligence arm, and charged with *Actividades Comunistas* (Communist activity).⁴⁶³ Guantánamo is off the beaten track and, even today, a difficult journey from Havana; most foreigners have only heard of the town in relation to the neighbouring US naval establishment. This isolation, while facilitating the growth of a revolutionary workers' movement, has helped to obscure the history of that movement from later researchers and may partly account for the sparse nature of the literature on the revolutionary movement in Guantánamo in the 1950s. Jana Lipman is the major exception; she lived there for six months, working in the archives and

⁴⁶⁰ Sarabia, *...y mi honda es la de David* (1967) pp.7-8

⁴⁶¹ García-Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution* (1998) p.72

⁴⁶² Espín, *Déborah* (1975) p.73

⁴⁶³ "Detenidos por el SIM 3 Obreros Acusados de Actividades Comunistas", *Voz del Pueblo* (July 4th 1955) p.1

interviewing survivors, as part of her wider investigation of the history of the workers on the US base. In this study there emerges details of the revolutionary activities in the area in which the base workers played full part (see chapters 6 & 7).⁴⁶⁴ Cuban historians have not shown significantly greater interest and we have to rely on the work of local historians in the provincial archives, the city library and the *Casa de Historia* for published details other than occasional scattered references.⁴⁶⁵ The report on the Guantánamo workers' movement by the *Comisión Nacional de Historia* (National History Commission) has never been published and exists only in manuscript.⁴⁶⁶ We are fortunate therefore that the University of Oriente in Santiago ran a project in the 1980s, which required some final year history undergraduates to write their dissertations on the struggles of the 1950s using interviews with surviving militants. Using these resources, this chapter will start by attempting to reconstruct the early development of the M-26-7 in Guantánamo.

Guantánamo was a city with strong working class traditions that centred on the railway yards. At the time, the railway was the only practical land link with the rest of the island and this gave the railway workers a sense of their own power, which they frequently exercised, not only for the betterment of their own economic position, but also in support of their wider political demands and in solidarity with other workers. They had built equally strong links with local students and peasants. In the latter case these links can be traced back to the epic battles of *Realengo 18* in the 1930s while, in the former, examples of joint action between students and railway workers can be found in the demonstrations organised in opposition to the March 10th coup d'etat and the *Canal Via Cuba* (see chapter 1).⁴⁶⁷ It is therefore no accident that Frank País's first call to organise a revolutionary organisation should be to the railwaymen.

The 1954-5 railway dispute was discussed in detail in the last chapter, but in order to trace the development of the M-26-7 in Guantánamo, it may be useful to return to

⁴⁶⁴ Lipman, *Guantánamo* (2009) pp.134-143

⁴⁶⁵ Sección de historia, *Reseña histórica de Guantánamo* (1985)

⁴⁶⁶ Comisión Nacional de Historia, *Provincia Guantánamo* (1980)

⁴⁶⁷ For more details on the *Realengo 18* struggles see:

Figueras, *Semblanza de Antonio Torres Chedebaux* (n/d) n.pag.

Suárez Ramos, *10 de noviembre: aniversario 70 de la victoria campesina del Realengo 18* (2004) n.pag.

Torriente Brau, *Realengo 18* (1933) n.pag.

Regalado, *Las luchas campesinas en Cuba* (1979) pp.65-77

For relationships with students see:

Sánchez Guerra & Canseco Aparicio, *El eco de las voces* (2006) p.75

Sección de historia, *Reseña histórica de Guantánamo* (1985) p.114

García Faure & Canseco Aparicio, *Algunas Manifestaciones Políticas en Guantánamo* (2009) p.41

some of the specific details of the conflict in that locality. In 1954, as soon as the financial situation of *FFCC Consolidados* became public knowledge and a strike appeared to be inevitable, *Delegación II*, the local branch of the railway workers' union, set up a *Comisión de Propaganda* (Propaganda committee), which distributed 12,000 leaflets during the course of the dispute.⁴⁶⁸ Once the strike started, many workers felt that the strike committee based on the official leadership was too passive and a mass meeting elected a second strike committee, which was then ratified by a meeting of departmental representatives.⁴⁶⁹ This ability to react quickly and collectively to changing situations was to prove crucial as the situation developed. In another move which prefigured their activities during the later stages of the insurrection against the dictatorship, striking workers derailed the train to the US base that was being driven by strikebreaking managers; an early example of *sindicalismo beligerante* (Figure 17).⁴⁷⁰ After the strike, in order to oppose the *mujalista* bureaucracy from the inside of the trade union movement, a *Comité Central de Acción Ferroviaria* (Railway Workers' Central Action Committee) was set up.⁴⁷¹ However, the defeat of a well organised strike by an economically powerful group of workers with considerable experience in industrial activity made some Guantánamo militants go a stage further. They concluded that, unless the Batista regime could be militarily defeated, they would no longer be able to defend and advance their conditions and wages, nor would they be able to regain control of their own trade union while Mujal, Balaños and their associates had the support of the state. The M-26-7 appeared to offer a solution to their problems. In return they would contribute their considerable industrial experience which would contribute enormously to the building of the underground resistance.⁴⁷²

By the end of 1955, the Guantánamo group of the M-26-7 had a stable leadership composed of:

Co-ordination and Propaganda - *Enrique Soto*
 Deputy for Propaganda - *Samuel Rodiles*
 Chief of Action and Sabotage - *Julio Camacho*
 Workers section - *Octavio Louit*
 Deputy for Workers' Section - *Ñico Torres*
 Other committee members - *Amancio Floirán, Margot Hernández.*

⁴⁶⁸ *Noticias de Hoy* (June 4th 1953)

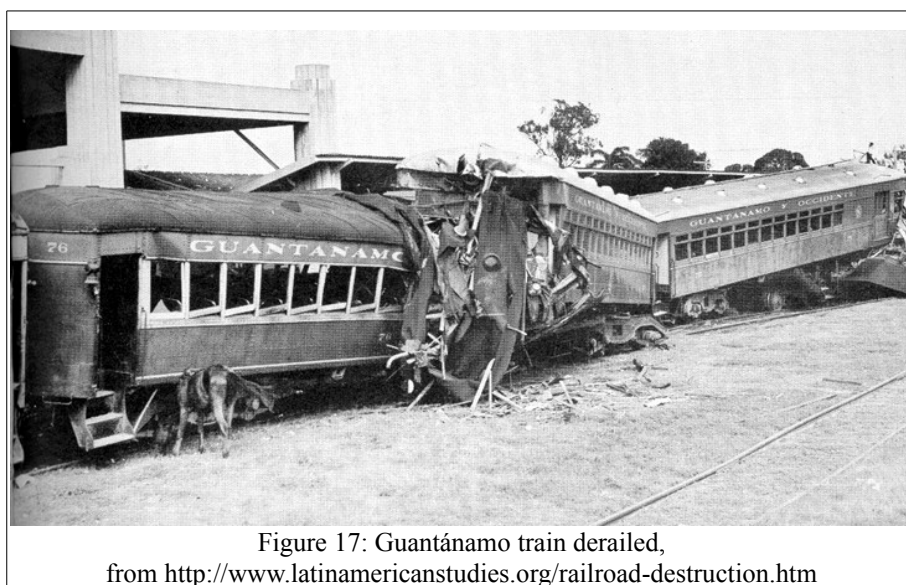
⁴⁶⁹ *Carta Semanal* (March 23rd 1955)

⁴⁷⁰ *Voz del Pueblo* (February 7th 1955)

⁴⁷¹ *Carta Semanal* (July 20th 1955)

⁴⁷² Figueras Pérez, *Interview with Luis Figueres* (2009)

Initially, the work of the group mainly consisted of recruiting and building a clandestine workplace based cell structure, each cell composed of a member responsible for co-ordination, one for sabotage, one for fund raising, one for propaganda and one for mass action such as strikes and demonstrations. Each cell member, apart from the co-ordinator, recruited up to 10 others to help with the work. The co-ordinator was the only member who had any contact with other members outside the cell. There was a flexibility in the structure of the cells of the *Sección Obrera*, with the organisations following the industrial and union structures in each trade.⁴⁷³



In order to grow, there was a need for propaganda to spread the word of the organisation's existence. In part this was a question of distributing national material such as Fidel Castro's courtroom speech, subsequently known as "History will absolve me", and nationally produced manifestos. The recruitment of several cells amongst the town's students gave access to the hand-operated printing facilities of the *Instituto de Segunda Enseñanza* (Institute of Secondary Education) and the teacher training college, which enabled the production of more specific and locally targeted leaflets. Further publicity was achieved by extensive wall-daubing of slogans, often simply writing "26 de Julio" in a public place. This was combined with ingenious publicity stunts such as releasing a horse in the town centre with placards denouncing the dictatorship tied to its back, causing the police to look ridiculous as they rushed about trying to catch the terrified animal.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁷³ Coma, *El Movimiento 26 de Julio en Guantánamo* (1981) p.31

Comisión Nacional de Historia, *Provincia Guantánamo* (1980) p.5-7

⁴⁷⁴ Sección de historia, *Reseña histórica de Guantánamo* (1985) pp.123-5

Throughout the insurrectionary period the propaganda produced by the M-26-7 was very strong in its denunciation of the iniquities of the regime and its allies, but much less specific about the proposed solutions, contenting itself mainly with a general appeal to rebellion and revolution. In this, there is a notable contrast with the printed material produced by the communist party, which contains quite detailed proposals. This is because the M-26-7 did not see itself as a political party, but as a movement which could unite all patriotic Cubans who believed in democracy and social justice. Given the cross-class alliance that the organisation represented, any attempt to be specific about the concrete meaning of these terms would have risked a split, which all sides of the movement wished to avoid.

In a manner that is common to effective militant rank and file working class organisation everywhere, it was necessary to undermine the influence of the trade union bureaucracy.⁴⁷⁵ To this end, the M-26-7 cells started to organise short strikes and go-slows over any issue that came to hand. On the railway, this policy was often implemented by stoppages of only 5 or 10 minutes, which nevertheless proved extremely disruptive to the railway timetable while minimising the possibility for victimisation. For example, the strike to defend the right to paid sick leave in July 1956 is evidence that the railway workers were still in a combative mood despite their defeat on the major issue a year earlier.⁴⁷⁶ As a result of this muscle flexing during 1956, the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera* was able to extend its organisation to other industries in the Guantánamo region, with sections amongst the workers in the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay, the sugar workers, shop workers, tobacco workers, bakers, electrical workers, telephonists, civil aviation, bus and taxi drivers.⁴⁷⁷

While building the organisation in the workplaces in Guantánamo, the newly recruited militants also started to prepare themselves for the forthcoming armed struggle. Some small arms were procured from the US base, purchased illegally from US military personnel, and over 200 volunteers spent time in remote rural areas familiarising themselves with their use. Gustavo Fraga, a worker on the US base, set up an explosives workshop which produced 600 grenades that Octavio Louit transported to Santiago using his position on the railway. Sugar workers in the workshops of *central Ermita* also constructed improvised explosive devices (IEDs). However, these early

⁴⁷⁵ Pearce, *Some Past Rank-and-File Movements* (1959) pp.13-24

⁴⁷⁶ *Carta Semanal* (July 18th 1956)

⁴⁷⁷ Comisión Nacional de Historia, *Provincia Guantánamo* (1980) pp.4-7

explosives were unreliable and it took some time and experimentation before effective IEDs would be produced. It is easy for amateurs to underestimate the difficulties involved in clandestine armed activity and there would be many casualties and arrests before the organisation gained the necessary experience and organisation to pose a military threat to the regime.

There was a similar problem with the early sabotage operations. Cane burning has a long history in Cuba and sugar workers, as Gillian McGillivray shows in her book *Blazing Cane*, had the necessary skills and experience. For instance, she speaks of the practice of soaking a rat in petrol, setting it alight and letting it run through the cane fields spreading the conflagration.⁴⁷⁸ However, most other industries did not have this experience and the early sabotage in the electricity industry was carried out with more enthusiasm than efficiency. This exposed the entire organisation to danger and it was quickly resolved to tighten the level of discipline in the selection of targets for sabotage. A major responsibility of the person in each cell charged with organising sabotage was to co-ordinate activity with the regional leadership to ensure organisational security. Once this approach was established, the number of sabotage actions was reduced, but their growing effectiveness helped to increase the atmosphere of crisis which undermined the regime's credibility.⁴⁷⁹

Luis Figueras, of the *Casa de Historia* (House of History) in Guantánamo, following his own interviews with surviving veterans, asserts that there was a clear intention to use explosives to cause material damage and to avoid injury to passers-by, although it is the nature of explosives, particularly in untrained hands, that they will often kill and injure innocent bystanders as well as killing the saboteurs themselves when they explode prematurely.⁴⁸⁰ This attempt to avoid "collateral damage" did not spare the M-26-7 the accusations of the *Partido Socialista Popular* that they were terrorists. However, given that many of the *guantanameros* were ex-trotskyists, there was also a legacy of sectarian bitterness to add to the tactical differences with the PSP and such accusations had little influence on them. Thus we see the M-26-7 and the PSP drawing different conclusions from the defeats of 1955 and reorganising to face the next period in a very different fashion.

⁴⁷⁸ McGillivray, *Blazing Cane* (2009) p.140

⁴⁷⁹ Coma, *El Movimiento 26 de Julio en Guantánamo* (1981) based on interviews with Enrique Soto, Luis Lara, Antonio Torres, Octavio Louit, Caridad Rosa Rossell, Benito Bell, Bernado Betancourt and workers in *Central Ermita*.

⁴⁸⁰ Interview with Luis Figueras Pérez (2009)

Partido Socialista Popular and Mass Action

The communist party's intervention in the sugar workers' dispute at the end of 1955 appears to have been quite successful and the detailed local strike reports in *Carta Semanal* indicate widespread party involvement in the action.⁴⁸¹ This success and the disappointing results of their participation in the electoral politics at the end of 1954 led the party to take a turn to the working class. This would bring them into closer contact with the M-26-7, as well as more direct competition. The resulting interaction would begin the process of convergence between the two organisations, although agreement at anything but local level was still a long way off. The public criticisms of Conrado Béquero in *Carta Semanal*, discussed in greater detail below, added personal antagonism to political differences.

The *Comités de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras* (CDDOs) had been active in the sugar industry since the end of 1954 with national leaflets issued in the name of the *Comité en Defensa de los Demandas de la Zafra de 1955* (Committee for the Defence of Demands for the 1955 Sugar Harvest) along with more local propaganda referring to specific problems or demands⁴⁸². The Havana CDDO felt strong enough to call for a demonstration outside the FNTA plenary which resulted in a group of militants staging a protest on the roof of the CTC headquarters, the *Palacio de los Trabajadores* (Workers' Palace).⁴⁸³ Archival evidence exists of CDDO propaganda amongst sugar workers continuing through 1955, as well as during and immediately after the strike itself. Moreover the government policy of blaming communists for the strike served to raise their standing amongst workers and, given the popular support for the strike, in some wider sections of the community as well.

Following a successful launch at a conference in April 1956, the national organisation, the *Comité Nacional de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras y por la Democratización de la CTC* (CNDDO), held monthly meetings which discussed quite detailed interventions in industrial disputes.⁴⁸⁴ For example, a copy of the report of the October 1956 national meeting has survived. This meeting discussed the elections in the

⁴⁸¹ *Carta Semanal* (January 11th 1956)

⁴⁸² IHC 1/8:13A1/6.1/1.1/1 CDDO de Güines (December 12th 1954)

IHC 1/8:13A1/3.1/1 CDDO de Trabajadores Azucareros de la Provincia de la Habana (January 1955)

IHC 1/8:13A1/4.1/1 CDDO de la Habana "*Todos a la plenaria nacional azucarera*" (January 1955)

⁴⁸³ IHC 1/8:13A1/2.1/1.1/1 Comité en Defensa de los Demandas de la Zafra de 1955 "*¡Alerta!*" (January 1955)

El Mundo (January 20th 1955)

⁴⁸⁴ *Carta Semanal* (April 4th & August 29th 1956)

FNTA, provided data to show that profits in the sugar industry were rising considerably, which justified a 15% wage claim, reported on a victorious 3 week strike against victimisation at the *Once-Once* textile factory, as well as continuing industrial action on the Havana buses. It finished with a discussion of progress in forming regional CDDOs.⁴⁸⁵ Throughout 1955 and 1956, there are records of provincial CDDOs being formed in Havana, Matanzas, Las Villas and Oriente, while the pages of *Carta Semanal* regularly contained reports of activity by local CDDO groups.⁴⁸⁶ A document from the archives of the *Instituto de Historia de Cuba* lists 61 CDDOs for the province of Havana by industry (see Figure 18). There is also a report that 60 workers attended the founding meeting of the CDDO for one of the Havana bus companies, *Omnibus Aliados* (Allied Omnibus). This group went on to issue a professionally printed 4 page manifesto, accompanied by an equally professionally printed pamphlet, with a cover price of 5¢, entitled *¿Qué es un comité de defensa de las demandas obreras?* (What is a Committee for the Defence of Workers' Demands), which explained the strategy in some detail.⁴⁸⁷ It is worth examining this bus workers' leaflet further as it gives valuable insight into the methodology behind the approach to industrial organisation taken by the PSP. The leaflet starts with a statement that the intention is not to divide or form a faction, but rather to unite all bus workers within the union with the intention of turning it into a fighting organisation which will defend and advance the workers' wages and conditions. The 18 point programme starts with a pay demand for a 30% increase and then goes on to list a series of specific grievances concerning Christmas bonuses, sick-pay, pension contributions etc. The programme continues with a series of measures to restore the democratic functioning of the union and calls for CDDO groups to be formed on each bus route. Significantly, the leaflet is signed by 32 named drivers. There are no overtly "political" demands.⁴⁸⁸ This would fit in with the PSP's general line of fighting for "immediate demands" as a means of advancing "*la lucha de masas*".

⁴⁸⁵ IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/31-33 CNDDO, "*Informe a la reunión nacional del CNDDO*" (October 1956)

⁴⁸⁶ IHC 1/8:13A1/9.1/1 CDDO de Matanzas (December 29th 1955)
 IHC 1/8:13A1/9.1/2 CDDO de Matanzas (September 30th 1956),
 IHC 1/8:13A1/11.1/1 CDDO de Las Villas (February 1st 1956),
 IHC 1/8:13A1/13.1/1-2 CDDO de Pielés, Santa Clara (n/d)
 IHC 1/8:13A1/15.1/1-2 CDDO de Puerta Padre (November 1956)

⁴⁸⁷ *Carta Semanal* (July 25th 1956)

IHC 1/8:13A1/5.1/4-13 CNDDO, "*¿Qué es un comité de defensa de las demandas obreras?*" (n/d)

⁴⁸⁸ IHC 1/8:13A1/5A1/1-4, CDDO, "*A todos los trabajadores de los Ómnibus Aliados*"(July 1956)

From the surviving evidence, it is hard to discern the extent to which the composition of the CDDO groups extended beyond the PSP membership and its immediate periphery, but there is sufficient detail to make it seem likely that, at least in some areas, they were able to intervene effectively in the labour movement at local level. Thus an account of the October 14th meeting of the local sugar workers' CDDO in Las Villas, the *Comité de*

GRAN TOTAL DE COMITES DE DEFENSA DE LAS DEMANDAS.-	
Azucareros.....	12
Familiares.....	
azucareros.....	7
Tabacaleros...	6
Zapateros.....	14
Textiles.....	4
O.Aliados.....	6
Metalurgicos...	4
Portuarios.....	2
Carpinteros...	1
Otros Comités..	5
	<hr/>
	61

Figure 18: List of CDDO's in Havana Province, from IHC 1/8:13A1/7.1/1-6 CNDDO "Rehorrir" (n/d)

las Demandas Azucareras de Las Villas (Las Villas Committee for Sugar Workers' Demands), records a discussion of a number of interventions in local disputes as well as organising a hunger march, all in a way that any serious working class militant would recognise.⁴⁸⁹ Be this as it may, the development of the CDDO strategy was sufficiently encouraging for the communist party leadership to believe that their general political orientation was correct. It has become customary to belittle the part played by PSP members in the insurrectionary phase of the Cuban revolution, but this ignores the immense contribution they made to sustaining levels of working class discontent in areas where they had influence.⁴⁹⁰ However, the PSP's success in embedding itself in the labour movement had been accompanied by a growing political inertia and resistance to change.

Nevertheless, with the notable exceptions of the ports and the tobacco industry, in nearly every case of industrial action in 1955 and early 1956, a combination of trade union corruption and government violence had proved too much for the unarmed workers, who saw themselves defeated sector by sector.⁴⁹¹ This situation required an explanation and the PSP drew the conclusion that the reason for the defeat was the lack of trade union unity, which could be restored by the CDDOs. This tactic was also seen

⁴⁸⁹ IHC 1/8:13A1/12.1/1-2, CDDO, "Reunión azucarera de Las Villas" (October 14th 1956),

⁴⁹⁰ e.g. Sims, *Cuban Labor and the Communist Party* (1985) pp.50-56

Farber, *The Cuban Communists in the Early Stages of the Cuban Revolution* (1983) pp.59-61

Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection*, (1974) pp.25&220-21

Anderson, *Che Guevara* (1997) pp.205-206

Murray, *The Second Revolution in Cuba* (1962) pp.4-5

Thomas, *Cuba, or, the pursuit of freedom* (1998) pp. 923, 929, 981

Suárez, *The Cuban Revolution: The Road to Power* (1972) p.17

Blackburn, *Prologue to the Cuban Revolution* (1963) p.87

⁴⁹¹ *Bohemia* (January 22nd 1956) p.55

as the way to overcome the the class-treason of Mujal and his associates, amongst whom they included sugar workers' leader Conrado Béquer.⁴⁹²

The relationship between the PSP and the purged sugar workers' leaders was strained, as can be seen by the tone of the reports in *Carta Semanal*. The communist newspaper formally supported Conrado Béquer and his colleagues and opposed their removal from office. However, it was clear that they thought that Béquer had only acted under mass pressure rather than from any political conviction. Béquer and Rodriguez were also criticised for not challenging the anti-communist attitudes of Mujal and Martinez.⁴⁹³ Later in February 1956, the PSP went further and denounced *Los Dos Conrados* in the same terms as Martinez.⁴⁹⁴ In October of the same year, the CNDDO published an open letter to Béquer and Rodriguez, denouncing them for trying to sneak back into the official union structure.⁴⁹⁵ The PSP were not to know that Conrado Béquer had secretly joined the 26th July movement at the end of the strike and that he was striving to conceal this from the authorities in order to retain the advantage of his limited parliamentary immunity. Thus, for example, he was able to appear on television with Conrado Rodriguez in the lead up to the 1957 *zafra*, gaining a platform to call for a strike if the previous year's *diferencial* were not paid promptly as well as demanding that previous years' wage cuts be restored, which caused the U.S. Embassy to give Béquer the credit for forcing the government's hand in the 6% sugar workers' wage increase of the following March.⁴⁹⁶ Such accusations would not make future relationships between the M-26-7 and the PSP any easier and serve as a demonstration of the difficulties experienced by public figures joining clandestine revolutionary organisations.

While the PSP had taken part in the campaign for the amnesty that had finally secured the release of the surviving Moncada veterans, it was slow to realise that the M-26-7 were potential allies.⁴⁹⁷ Nevertheless, the two organisations did not completely ignore each other. During Fidel Castro's stay in Mexico, he was in contact with several exiled Cuban communists, including Lazaro Peña, who had been General Secretary of

⁴⁹² *Carta Semanal* (February 1956 - special issue)

⁴⁹³ *Carta Semanal* (January 18th, 25th 1956 & special issue February 1956)

⁴⁹⁴ *Carta Semanal* (Special issue February 1956)

⁴⁹⁵ IHC 1/8:13/A1/1.1/27 CNDDO, "*Carta Abierta*" (12th October 1956)

⁴⁹⁶ *El Mundo* (November 22nd 1956)

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 651 (April 3, 1957) *Sugar; Conrado Becquer [sic]; CTC;*

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 678 (April 12, 1957) *Labor Briefs for March, 1957: Sugar wage increase 6%*

⁴⁹⁷ *Carta Semanal* (April 1955)

the CTC before the 1948 *mujalista* takeover, when the PSP was the dominant force in the federation⁴⁹⁸. It is hard to know whether these contacts were sanctioned by, or even occurred with the knowledge of, the communist party leadership, for while the PSP was far from monolithic and contained the factions and personal differences that are inevitable in any party, it was remarkably disciplined and nearly always presented a common front to the outside world. These contacts produced no agreement, but reflect an increasing realisation in some sections of the PSP that the M-26-7 was a force to be reckoned with. Thus we see, on the 15th August 1956, when commenting on one of Fidel Castro's statements, the PSP introduced the concept of armed insurrection as a possibility, all the while continuing to stress the necessity to link this with mass action.⁴⁹⁹

The practical implications of the different positions held by the M-26-7 and the PSP can be discerned in their different interpretations of an earlier period in Cuban revolutionary struggle; the uprising against Machado in August 1933 and the subsequent general strike in 1935. In August 1956, the PSP began referring back to these events to argue for a mass general strike to bring down the government, a tactic which became central to their propaganda for the next period.⁵⁰⁰ However, their version of the history was only partially correct as they concentrated on the successful strikes of 1933 and ignored the failure of the 1935 strike.. The massive general strike in 1933 was combined with an army mutiny, ironically led by Batista himself. A general strike always poses the question of state power and the balance of armed force, but on this occasion, army involvement meant that the question of state repressive violence was not at issue. The M-26-7, on the other hand, concentrated on explaining the failure of the 1935, which the army mobilised to smash, in terms of the failure to combine a general strike with armed insurrection.⁵⁰¹ The latter approach appeared increasingly relevant to many working class militants, as the Ministry of Labour used state power to shore up Mujal's hold on the trade union machine through the process known as "*Intervención*", thereby making it increasingly difficult to operate within the official union movement.

⁴⁹⁸ Draper, *Castroism* (1965) pp.28-29

Rojas, *Primer Partido Comunista 3* (2011) pp.180-204

⁴⁹⁹ *Carta Semanal* (August 15th 1956)

⁵⁰⁰ *Carta Semanal* (August 8th 1956)

⁵⁰¹ Archivo Provincial Histórico de Matanzas (APHM) Fondo Tribunal de Urgencia, Legajo 161, Caja 128, *A los trabajadores* (1956), cited in García Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution* (1998) p.72 & 122
Whitney, *State and revolution in Cuba* (2001) pp.101-148

Mujalista Interventions

If the M-26-7 and the PSP used the year of 1956 to consolidate and expand their strength in the labour movement, the *mujalista* bureaucracy was pushed onto the defensive and had to rely more and more on the support of the state. During the course of 1956 and 57, intervention in the internal affairs of the CTC's constituent federations and local unions became one of the principal sources of friction in Cuba's industrial relations. The methods used became increasingly draconian with each attempt and demonstrated the developing reliance of Mujal on the Ministry of Labour as his base in the unions withered. This section will examine the mechanisms that Mujal and his allies used to control the CTC structure, as well as the close relationship with the state that, on the one hand, enabled them to maintain their grip, but on the other increasingly bound their fate to the successes and failures of the Batista regime. The *mujalista* tactics included interference in union elections, removal from office of elected officials, expulsions of troublesome officials from the unions and discrediting individual leaders by false or exaggerated accusations of Communism, Peronism, racism etc. To these internal means of control, should be added the direct intervention of the state which ranged from the Ministry of Labour postponing or annulling elections through to the presence of armed soldiers intimidating those who dared attend union meetings that might vote to defy the leadership. This process led to greater discontent amongst the workers and alienated previously loyal sections of the bureaucracy. This discontent and alienation resulted in the necessity for ever increased use of the state to maintain Mujal's position, which in turn gave those opposed to the regime an argument that the return to trade union democracy required the overthrow of the regime.

The anti-communist purges of the CTC had begun in the late 1940s, when the PSP was removed from its leadership positions as part of the *mujalista* takeover.⁵⁰² The first major use of the procedure against non-communist union officials occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 1955 bank workers dispute (see chapter 3). The purged officials were allowed to stand for re-election in the next set of elections and they won, only to be removed from office on a technicality.⁵⁰³ Learning from this incident, when the FNTA was purged following the sugar workers strike, the elections were rigged to prevent the purged officials gaining re-election. This proved counter-productive from Mujal's point of view and thereafter, officials were appointed with little or no pretence

⁵⁰² FO 371/67972-AK1689/14 (1948) *Labour and Communism in Cuba*

⁵⁰³ *Carta Semanal* (March 14th 1956), Valdespino, *Agresión totalitaria a la libertad sindical* (1956)

of democracy. We shall discuss these two cases in some detail to better understand the developing internal politics of the CTC and then examine a surprising turn of events in the electrical workers federation, where Mujal needed to request ministry intervention to secure his control of this previously docile trade union. It will be argued that this was an indication of the extent of disaffection amongst the Cuban working class at the time of Fidel Castro's return from his Mexican exile.

As described in chapter 3, the bank workers revolt was defeated in the middle of 1955. An "intervention committee" took control of the Havana branch of the trade union and a large number of militants were dismissed from their employment. Nevertheless, the strike leader José María de la Aguilera and some of his comrades stood for office in the March 1956 national elections for the *Federación Bancaria* (Bank workers' federation) and, much to the surprise of the *mujalista* faction in the union, they won handsomely at national level as well as the provincial elections in Havana, Las Villas and Oriente. The Ministry of Labour was equally surprised, having allowed the rebel faction to stand because it was felt they had no chance of success. The Ministry now acted in a manner which would undermine the legitimacy of the *mujalistas* by disqualifying Aguilera's faction on the grounds that they did not work in the industry, having been dismissed at the end of the strike. This approach effectively gave an employer the right of veto in trade union elections as they could dismiss a candidate from his or her employment and thereby disqualify them.⁵⁰⁴ Apart from a brief notice of his arrest in October 1956, there is little further trace of Aguilera in the public record until he emerges as one of the leaders of the M-26-7 *Sección obrera* in January 1959.⁵⁰⁵ We know, however, that he was one of the principal underground leaders of the M-26-7 in Havana. His hand can be seen in the recruitment of the local M-26-7 *Secciones obreras* which, in almost every case where there is a surviving record, there seems to be at least one bank worker in a leadership position. It should also be noted that, if militant workers were learning new approaches to organisation, so too were the *mujalistas*, who did not make the mistake of allowing a free election again.

The next union to suffer intervention at the hands of the CTC was the sugar workers federation, the FNTA. This trade union contained a significant group of leading officials who, while being members of the *Auténtico* party, were not supporters of

⁵⁰⁴ *Carta Semanal* (March 14th 1956), Valdespino, *Agresión totalitaria a la libertad sindical* (1956)

⁵⁰⁵ *Carta Semanal* (October 26th 1956)
Cueto, *El 26 de julio en la dirección sindical* (1959)

Mujal. Their differences had come to a head over the sugar workers' strike at the end of 1955 and they publicly expressed their opposition. The way in which Mujal dealt with this problem relied more heavily on the state than previously, in part because this represented the first real split in the CTC bureaucracy.

On January 4th 1956, immediately after the strike, Eusebio Mujal and FNTA general secretary José Luis Martínez were given a direct instruction from Batista to purge the opposition, receiving the full support of the police in so doing. The police surrounded the *Palacio de los Trabajadores*, the main building of the CTC in Havana where the FNTA also had its headquarters, and refused admission to Conrado Béquer, Conrado Rodríguez and their associates. At the same time, Martínez issued a press statement saying that they had been expelled. Three of the expelled sugar workers, Béquer, Rodríguez and Jorge Cruz were parliamentary deputies and they drew considerable media attention to the expulsions by staging a hunger strike in the Capitol building.⁵⁰⁶ Meanwhile Mujal accused Béquer of being a communist. As with the report of the arrest of Níco Torres on a similar charge referred to above, these are examples of the way in which Cold War anti-communism was used as a cover for attacks on any militant worker, even those such as Béquer and Torres with a long history of political disagreements to the PSP. In the case of Mujal's attack on Béquer, the use made of "guilt by association" is particularly striking as Mujal's evidence for the accusation was that he had seen photographs of Béquer talking to known "reds". Béquer's reply was that he had seen pictures of President Eisenhower talking to known communist leaders such as Molotov at the United Nations and went on to ask if the FBI were investigating the US President on the same basis.⁵⁰⁷

Mujal and Martínez's actions were endorsed by the CTC executive, although it was necessary to again surround the building with police to exclude those members of the executive who might oppose the intervention. The only mildly contrary voice came from Angel Cofiño of the electricity workers' union, the *Federación de Plantas Eléctricas*, who was concerned at the extent of the interventions rather than the

⁵⁰⁶ "Obreros", *Bohemia* (January 15th 1956) p.61-65

"Obreros", *Bohemia* (January 22nd 1956) n.pag.

Voz del Pueblo (January 5th 1956) p.1,

Cueto, *El pleito sindical de los trabajadores azucareros* (1956) n.pag.,

"Huelga de Hambre" *Bohemia* (January 27th 1956) pp.65-70

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 536 (January 31, 1956) *Conrado Rodríguez; Conrado Becquer* [sic]

⁵⁰⁷ "Obreros" *Bohemia* (January 15th 1956) p.62

principle. Mujal explained that the intervention committee had been obliged to seek police and army support because of threats of violence from some of his opponents.

There was considerable opposition to the interventions amongst the union rank and file, with strikes and demonstrations in Yaguajay, Sagua la Grande, Morón, Ciego de Avila and Florida. While the workers at *central Narcisa* in Yaguajay were alone in staying out on strike against the interventions for nearly two weeks, workers in many other workplaces refused to work with the newly imposed "official" union representatives. In many cases the employers quietly asked them to leave in order to ensure that the harvest went ahead. The authorities matched this resistance from the workers by arrests leading to prison sentences, which ranged from 90 days for 11 workers in Madruga to a year in a reform school for a 17 year old communist, Oscar Bengochea from Sancti Spiritus. An electrical worker, whose case was reported nationally when it was discovered that he was a personal friend of Angel Cofiño, was also imprisoned for a year for sabotage committed in solidarity with the strike; he had plunged the city of Cienfuegos into darkness. Even more generalised were the victimisations of known militants, with mass sackings of 50 or more workers not uncommon. The level of state support for the interventions can also be seen from the use of troops to seize control of the union offices in *central Trinidad*, which was Béquer's home base.⁵⁰⁸

The FNTA elections, scheduled for February 1956, were postponed by the Ministry of Labour in the aftermath of the recently defeated sugar workers' strike and eventually took place on 26th August 1956. In order to achieve the desired result, decree 1559 introduced the idea of a *sello de buen cotizante*, a stamp to indicate that its holder was a member in good standing. When Béquer condemned the failure to distribute these in areas where the opposition had support, Mujal replied in a radio broadcast which must have shocked even some of his own supporters:

*What do they want? The stamps are not for sharing out amongst those who oppose us ... If our enemies decide on violence on election day, blood will flow, not ours, but theirs.*⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁸ *Carta Semanal* (February 1st & 15th 1956)
"CTC", *Bohemia* (January 27th 1956) n.pag.,

⁵⁰⁹ *'Que quieren? Los sellos del buen cotizante no son para repartirlos entre los que nos hacen la oposición sindical ... Si los enemigos se deciden por la violencia el día de las elecciones, correrá la sangre, pero no la nuestra, sino la de ellos.'* - "Obreros" *Bohemia* (September 2nd 1956) [My translation]

Some stamps finally arrived, although so did the rural guard and, while Béquer was allowed to stand for local office in *central Trinidad* and Rodriguez in Sagua la Grande, Mujal later used their victories to claim that this proved that the elections were fair. The PSP did not appreciate the stand taken by Béquer and Rodriguez and the CNDDO attacked the pair for writing an open letter to the new executive of the FNTA, criticising them for failing to recognise that the new executive was as bad as the old and accusing them of trying to sneak back.⁵¹⁰ In most places the elections were openly corrupt, for example in *central Dolores*, out of over 500 workers, only 32 were allowed to vote in an election supervised by a platoon of soldiers. On the eve of FNTA congress, which took place a month later, Conrado Rodriguez placed proof of Mujal's corrupt misuse of the compulsory check-off before the court. Nothing came of this, but Mujal was spurred to issue an angry and unconvincing rebuttal to the press. Fearing for their safety, *los Dos Conrados* arrived at the congress armed with pistols, but were forcibly disarmed at the door. When Béquer spoke from the rostrum, he was booed and jeered by Mujal's supporters, which resulted in a fist fight.⁵¹¹

These elections were obviously intended to give a measure of legitimacy to the *mujalista* faction but, in order to win they had to run the election in such an openly corrupt fashion that, if anything, their claims to legitimacy were reduced still further. Furthermore, the fact that they had to allow some opposition election victories meant that Béquer and Rodriguez were able to cause a scandal at the congress. From Mujal's perspective, however, there was one positive outcome; José Luis Martínez, who had been blatantly embezzling FNTA funds, was replaced by Prisciliano Falcón.⁵¹² Falcón had been the provincial secretary of the CTC in Oriente and had proved his loyalty to Mujal in Camagüey by assuming control of the sugar workers union there following the 1956 purges, when no local candidate could be found.

This election marked the end of Mujal's flirtation with democracy, the bank workers had proved that he could not retain control in the face of a genuine election, while a rigged election did nothing to enhance his reputation and could be used by his

⁵¹⁰ *Carta Semanal* (October 26th 1956)

⁵¹¹ Feijoo, *Obreros de la Zafra* (1956) n.pag.
"Obreros" *Bohemia* (September 2nd 1956) pp.61-2
Carta Semanal (August 22nd & 29th 1956)
Mujal, *Verdad contra infamia* (1956)
"Obreros" *Bohemia* (October 14th 1956) pp.72-3

⁵¹² U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 10 (July 6, 1956) *Labor Developments--Cuba: January--June 1956*
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 509 (February 19, 1957) *Labor Briefs for January, 1957*

opponents to undermine his position. Intervention in *central Trinidad* and the final removal of Béquer from all elected office, which took place in March of 1957, marked the end of any pretence of democracy within the CTC, which thereafter openly operated as Mujal's personal fiefdom. This meant that any trade unionist who seriously wanted to defend wages and working conditions had to align with the opposition. There were still some honest, but not particularly radical, union officials who had gone along with Mujal up to this point; Samuel Powell of the sugar workers union is probably the most prominent. The contradictions proved too much for a number of these, who left the Cuban labour movement entirely, further reducing Mujal's legitimacy.



Figure 19: Angel Cofiño, from *Bohemia* (1957)

The personal rule of Mujal within the CTC threatened even the "loyal opposition" based around Angel Cofiño (Figure 19), leader of the electricity workers' union. The final split came over the government's decree 538, published on 13th March 1957. This decree forbade the employment of "communists" in public service and was warmly welcomed by Mujal. There was considerable opposition to the wide ranging nature of this decree, which was summed up by a *Bohemia* columnist, Andres Valdespino, as giving the employers, who he described as the most reactionary in the world, the right to denounce anyone who disagreed with the current economic order as a communist.⁵¹³ The U.S. Embassy recognised that Mujal could use control of the screening panel to whittle away at Cofiño's base in the electrical workers' union.⁵¹⁴ Cofiño saw this as both a threat to his independence and, given the general political turmoil over the decree, an opportunity to gain independence from Mujal's tutelage for the *Federación Eléctrica*. The two men's relationship, never good, had deteriorated further when, in February 1957, Mujal had manoeuvred to replace Cofiño with Oscar Samalea as President of the Retirement Fund of the Electrical, Gas and Water Workers.⁵¹⁵ Reacting to this situation, the executive of the *Federación Eléctrica* called a referendum amongst its membership on the proposition that the electrical workers leave the CTC on the grounds that decree 538 threatened the

⁵¹³ Valdespino, *El decreto 538: ¿Contra el comunismo or contra la libertad?* (1957) pp.51&99

⁵¹⁴ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 630 (March 28, 1957) *Two Labor Federations Oppose Decree 538*

⁵¹⁵ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 486 (February 7, 1957) *Angel Cofiño Replaced By Oscar Salamea as President of Electrical Workers' Retirement Fund*

independence of the federation. The Ministry of Labour proved them correct by using another decree to justify intervention and the executive of the *Federación Eléctrica* were suspended for 2 years. The telephone workers' union executive, often seen as allies of Cofiño, were silenced by the threat of a similar fate if they supported the electricians.

The reaction of the workers in the electrical industry surprised everyone, as they had no tradition of militancy and were considered by many to be part of the "aristocracy of labour". Workers in Pinar del Rio occupied the company office until they were ejected by the police. The same thing happened in Santa Clara, but here they retreated to the union office and barricaded themselves in. The response in Santiago was a *paso de jicotea*, while Camagüey reacted with a half-day strike. However, Havana was the centre of resistance to the intervention, led by the women who worked in the offices. Despite Cofiño's attempts to reach a compromise to save his position, the dispute took on a life of its own. There were a series of demonstrations and walkouts which continued until late May, when the women from the head office of the electricity company used Mothers' Day as an excuse for a pro-Cofiño rally.⁵¹⁶ Even the baseball matches at the sports clubs of bank, telephone and electrical workers became scenes of demonstrations for trade union democracy. Sabotage of the street lighting circuits started to occur and small bombs went off in electricity sub-stations. Mujal claimed that this proved that communists were involved, while the head of the national police offered a reward of 5000 pesos for information on the saboteurs. Decree 1045, issued on May 14th, re-inflamed the situation by declaring whole layers of workers "confidential employees" who could not join the union.

The women from the offices staged a demonstration outside the union building, the police opened fire with bird-shot and 30 were arrested (Figure 20). Cofiño, now in hiding, called for a go-slow which quickly spread to Oriente, Las Villas and Camagüey. On the 16th May, the telephone workers stopped work for 15 minutes in solidarity and, while Mujal was publicly denying the effects of the movement, the intervention committee felt obliged to declare another 80 expulsions from the union. All of this reminded the bank workers of their recent difficulties and, despite the best efforts of the imposed *mujalista* leadership, these workers struck for 15 minutes on the 21st May.

⁵¹⁶ "Obreros" & "Conflictos sociales" *Bohemia* (April 21st 1957) n.pag.,
"Obreros" *Bohemia* (April 28th 1957) n.pag.,
Carta Semanal (April 3rd, 5 May, 22nd May 1957)

The government appointed a "military intervention officer" over the electrical workers' union who, working with the intervention committee, directed a strikebreaking operation. This had limited effect because of the skilled nature of many of the jobs in the industry. The army presence did, however, cause many workers to walk out entirely. The army gave the striking workers until the 23rd to return to normal working and by this date, most had gone back. Soldiers occupied the electrical plants, making notes of absences and slow or deliberately careless work, while many rank and file leaders, many of them women, were arrested. Press reports suggested that both the company and the ministry had tried to put pressure on Mujal to diffuse the situation but he refused to back down, perhaps because he realised that if he were to be seen to give in in the face of mass pressure, his hold on the apparatus of the CTC could quickly crumble.⁵¹⁷



Figure 20: Demonstrations by Electrical Workers in Havana, from *Bohemia* (April 21st 1957) n.pag.

An interesting side issue in the electrical workers' dispute is the question of racism. In the public dispute between Mujal and Cofiño, one of the accusations that Mujal raised is that of racism in the electrical workers union which, he points out, had only recently withdrawn its support for a colour bar on employment in the profession and was still overwhelmingly white.⁵¹⁸ The fact that this accusation could be used as part of a justification for intervention implies a low level of racism within the Cuban working class. It is reasonable to suppose that there was little politically significant racism between workers or otherwise Mujal, not known for taking up unpopular issues of principle, would not have raised the matter. This denunciation of racism coincided

⁵¹⁷ "Obreros" *Bohemia* (June 2nd 1956) pp.91-2

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 831 (June 5, 1957) *Chronology re Intervention of the Federation of Electric, Gas and Water Plants*

⁵¹⁸ "Obreros" *Bohemia* (April 28th 1956) pp.85-6&94-5,

with a large public anti-racist rally, which was organised by the main organisation representing Afro-Cubans, the *Federación de Sociedades Cubanas* (Federation of Cuban Societies). This meeting took place in the CTC headquarters with Mujal and his close associates playing a leading role and denouncing racial discrimination in very strident terms.⁵¹⁹

The increasingly heavy-handed approach taken by Mujal and the Ministry of Labour in their use of the intervention procedures is clear evidence of the growing levels of disenchantment amongst the general union membership. This would provide fertile ground for the growth of the July 26th *Sección Obrera*, which would have its first serious test at the end of 1956 with the return of Fidel Castro.

Granma and the Workers

Fidel Castro and his comrades planned to return to Cuba in the motor launch *Granma* at the end of November 1956. In Santiago, Frank País had the responsibility of organising an armed uprising to cover the landing. The plan also required supporting activity in Guantánamo. The actions in Santiago and Guantánamo were significant in several ways. They demonstrate a growing rapprochement between some elements in the PSP and the M-26-7, the strength of the organisation in Guantánamo was clearly shown and the concept of *sindicalismo beligerante* was given its first test. On the other hand, the military inexperience of the militants was clear and weaknesses that would need to be addressed in the future became apparent.

On the morning of 30th November 1956, a group of men, dressed in olive green uniforms with red and black armbands marked "26 Julio" and carrying machine guns and M-1 rifles, attacked the customs office in Santiago, quickly managing to set it alight with Molotov cocktails (Figure 21). As soldiers arrived to reinforce those in the customs house, the rebels spread out through the city, attacking numerous other targets. In the chaos, a military Jeep collided with a jam delivery lorry and the frustrated soldiers shot the driver and his assistant. By 9am, the army and police, unaware of the strength of their opponents, had retreated to their barracks, leaving the rebels in command of the streets. It was several hours before the authorities could regain control of the island's second city, following the arrival of 400 reinforcements under the command of Colonel Barrera Pérez, who would be appointed military commander of Santiago, following the

⁵¹⁹ Otero Gonzalez, *¡La confraternidad humana no permite discriminación alguna!* (1957) n.pag



Figure 21: Santiago customs house in flames, from *Bohemia* (December 9th 1956) n.pag.

humiliation of his predecessor.⁵²⁰ The actions of the M-26-7 in Santiago were largely successful in their primary objective, which was to draw attention away from the arrival of the nucleus of the rebel army on the coast near Manzanillo, although they did result in important losses of life amongst the rebels. The national leadership of the PSP was aware of the impending *Granma* landing, but they thought that the whole scheme was adventurist and wanted no part of it. However, the local PSP organisation in Santiago had cordial relations with the *Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio* and took a different view. As a result, the military actions of the M-26-7 on 30th November 1956 received the support of the Santiago communists led by Ladislao Carvajal, provincial secretary of the PSP, in defiance of a direct order from Havana.⁵²¹ This cordial relationship was particularly important in the port where their co-operation extended to help with distributing each other's clandestine propaganda to reduce the risk of police detection.⁵²² So, on the morning of the 30th November, Juan Taquechel successfully pulled the Santiago docks out on strike in support of the insurrectionary activities organised by the M-26-7.⁵²³ As a result Taquechel, Sergio Valiente and three other

⁵²⁰ "Santiago de Cuba", "Desembarco" & "Los Sucesos de Santiago" *Bohemia* (December 9th 1956) n.pag.

⁵²¹ Taquechel & Poumier, *Juan Taquechel López y el movimiento obrero en Santiago* (2009) p.120

⁵²² Coya, *El movimiento obrero en Santiago* (1982) p.79

⁵²³ Taquechel & Poumier, *Juan Taquechel* (2009)

dockers' leaders were suspended from office and then dismissed from their employment by the Ministry of Labour in January 1957.⁵²⁴

Frank País had previously requested the M-26-7 branch in Guantánamo to aid the actions in Santiago in two ways, firstly by impeding the progress of reinforcements from Guantánamo to Santiago and secondly by forcing the military in the Guantánamo region to remain on a war footing, thereby distracting them from both the uprising in Santiago and Fidel Castro's landing near Manzanillo. Command of the M-26-7 actions was divided between Julio Camacho, Octavio Louit and Níco Torres. Comancho's responsibility was to lead an attack on the barracks in *central Ermita*, while in the town itself, Louit organised sharpshooters to open fire on the post office, the police station and the barracks of the *Guardia Rural*. Torres had the responsibility of organising a general strike in the area and to prepare a group of guerrillas to start another front in the Sierra Canasta. The attack at *Ermita*, carried out by workers from the refinery itself, was relatively successful because of the element of surprise. Following this attack, the group managed to block the road out of town and shut down the train access to Santiago by holding up a train at gunpoint and disabling it. Some of those involved later returned to work believing they had not been recognised, but they were mistaken and they were arrested. On the other hand, the armed actions in town failed because the cartridges had become damp and would not fire.⁵²⁵

Torres's group started by cutting the telephone connections with the outside world and set fire to several railway bridges. However, there was confusion around the start of the strike as the signal to walk out was to have been the shots fired in the attack on the police station. Given the problem with the damp cartridges, the signal could not be given and the strike did not start until the following morning. Once the word was passed successfully, the strike was fully observed and the town shut down completely. Government forces obliged some stores to open at gun point, but they quickly shut again when the soldiers had passed on. Soldiers also drove some buses, but these were boycotted by the townsfolk. Having achieved their objective of assisting the uprising in Santiago, the majority of workplaces returned to work on the 3rd December, while the railway workers stayed out until the 6th. Both Louit and Torres state, in later

⁵²⁴ IHC 1/8:13/38.1/1-66/A3-A4, CDDO de Santiago de Cuba, *Carta Abierta* (1957)
U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 509 (February 19, 1957) *Labor Briefs for January, 1957*

⁵²⁵ Comisión Nacional de Historia, *Provincia Guantánamo* (1980) pp.7-8
Coma, *El Movimiento 26 de Julio en Guantánamo* (1981) pp.34-37
Sección de historia del partido en Guantánamo, *Reseña histórica de Guantánamo* (1985) pp.125-131

interviews, that the Guantánamo PSP helped with the strike action, but insist that the action was clearly led by and under the control of the M-26-7.⁵²⁶ We should recognise the organisational achievement represented by a 5 day railway strike in solidarity with an armed uprising and which that posed no economic or political demands. There have been few parallels in history, perhaps the only comparable example is the French general strike of August 1944 at the time of the liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation, where the lead was also taken by railway workers.⁵²⁷

Conclusion

The government must still have appeared to be in a strong position at the beginning of 1957, an assessment shared by the British Ambassador who reported that the government "has the backing of the Army, big business and the United States".⁵²⁸ The clandestine preparations made by both the July 26th Movement and the PSP, even if they had been detected, cannot at this stage have appeared to pose any great threat to the stability of the situation, while the events surrounding the *Granma* landing must have seemed like a storm in a teacup. The greatly reduced number of strikes since the defeat of the sugar workers would have reinforced the backing the government received from big business and the United States, with those few strikes that did break out being quickly isolated and defeated. It was unlikely that the growth of the CDDOs would have seemed very impressive to the government, as the CTC remained firmly in the hands of Mujal and his associates. The interventions and purges in the trade unions would have appeared to be successful in removing a few troublemakers. Most importantly, profits were increasing, while wages were falling behind price increases on basic goods.

This would, however, prove to be the last period of relative tranquillity for Batista and his government, as the industrial peace proved to be only a temporary lull. The growing concern and confusion in the U.S. Embassy reports indicate the general surprise at the militancy of the electrical industry workers' response to the purging of Angel Cofiño.⁵²⁹ It can be seen as a symptom of a new atmosphere of discontent and a

⁵²⁶ Comisión Nacional de Historia, *Provincia Guantánamo* (1980) pp.7-8 & 17-18

Coma, *El Movimiento 26 de Julio en Guantánamo* (1981) pp.37-39

Figueras, *Semblanza de Antonio Torres* (n/d)

Tennant, *Interview with Octavio Louit* (1997)

⁵²⁷ Chevandier, *Cheminots en grève* (2002) pp.204-218

⁵²⁸ FO 371/126467 - AK1015/1 *Reports on the unrest in Cuba* (January 1957)

⁵²⁹ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 610 (March 21, 1957) *Labor Briefs for February, 1957; Dissension among Electrical Plant Workers*

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 678 (April 12, 1957) *Labor Briefs for March, 1957; Electrical workers attempt to withdraw from the CTC*

recovery in working class confidence. The M-26-7 in Guantánamo showed the important role that organised labour could play in an insurrectionary situation and, while this approach was still limited to a small area in the far eastern end of the island, their successes did not go unnoticed in parts of the M-26-7 leadership. Meanwhile, the PSP continued to fan the flames of discontent.



Figure 22: Cartoon referring to the overthrow of Machado in August 1933 from *Carta Semanal* (August 22nd, 1936)

However, an examination of the politics of the PSP during 1956 shows the hope that mass struggle for immediate economic demands would grow into more generalised action, which would lead to the end of the Batista regime by relatively peaceful means, based on their interpretation of the August 1933 strike which, in their analysis, led to the end of the Machado dictatorship; they conveniently ignored the role of the Army in the removal of Machado. The next chapter contrasts this with the developing politics of the M-26-7, who instead drew the lesson from the failed 1935

general strike that such a strike needed to be combined with an armed insurrection in order to succeed.

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- U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 709 (April 24, 1957) *Labor problem of electrical workers continues*
 - U.S. Embassy Havana, Telegram 548 (May 16, 1957) *Cuban Electric Company strike*
 - U.S. Embassy Havana, Telegram 560 (May 22, 1957) *Government military interventor at electric generating plants and substations*
 - U.S. Embassy Havana, Telegram 565 (May 24, 1957) *Cofiño may attempt to create blackout over weekend to be coordinated with insurrectionary activities of "26 of July" Movement*
 - U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 807 (May 27, 1957) *Labor Briefs for April, 1957*
 - U.S. Embassy Havana, Telegram 577 (May 29, 1957) *Cofiño in hiding called off strike; cables dynamited at Suarez Street*
 - U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 831 (June 5, 1957) *Labor Chronology re Intervention of the Labor Federation of Electric, Gas and Water Plants*

Chapter 5. Responses to State Terror

The British Embassy's assessment of the situation in Cuba at the beginning of 1957 was that "*recent events drawing attention to anti-Batista feelings in the island should not blind us to the government's basic strength*".⁵³⁰ The Ambassador was not alone in failing to recognise the threat that Fidel Castro and his forces might present to the regime, for the early days in the Sierra Maestra were extremely difficult for the rebels. However, as the year progressed and the rebel force grew in size and effectiveness, the diplomatic reports became increasingly concerned that "*as long as the Cuban government handles affairs as badly as they have done up to now, there is little prospect of an improvement*". The ambassador recognised the counter-productive nature of police brutality, nevertheless understanding that "*when terrorism is rampant it is not easy to stop the police using unlawful methods*".⁵³¹

As the year 1957 progressed, the opposition reacted to these "unlawful methods" with protest strikes and a number of women's demonstrations as well as an increase in armed actions and sabotage. These different tactics for handling violent state repression represent the tactical divergence between the PSP and the M-26-7, with the communist party insisting on *la lucha de masas*, while the rebels led by Fidel Castro were advocating a more military approach. Most of the historiographical discussion has hitherto concentrated on the pronouncements of the leaderships of these two groups without much consideration of the practical activity of ordinary militants. This approach fails to examine the interaction of ordinary militants of both organisations at rank and file level, where the realities of clandestine labour organisation often forced militants of different tendencies to co-operate in the workplace situation, frequently without the knowledge or approval of their leaders.⁵³²

The response of the Batista government to the *Granma* landing and the start of rebel military operations in the Sierra Maestra represents a fundamental turning point in the history of the Cuban revolution. Up to this point, police action had been kept within certain limits. In the main, the security forces had used clubs, the flats of their machetes or fire hoses to repress dissent. From the start of 1957, we see increased use of firearms,

⁵³⁰ FO 371/126467 - AK1015/8 *Political situation in Cuba* (February 22nd 1957)

⁵³¹ FO371/126467 - AK1015/28 *Review of the opposition parties in Cuba* (June 28th 1957)

⁵³² eg. Darushenkov, *Cuba, el camino de la revolución* (1979) pp.163-174

PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano, II* (1985) pp.320-333

Cannon, *Revolutionary Cuba* (1981) pp.76-91

resulting in many more deaths and serious injuries. There was also the start of a systematic use of torture and semi-official death squads. The next two chapters consider developments from December 1956 through to May 1958. During this period the two principal opposition tendencies with influence amongst the working class, the PSP and the M-26-7, pursued different strategies in the face of this increased repression. Both organisations learnt from their experiences and, by the beginning of the summer of 1958, there was sufficient convergence for them to discuss joint work; arguably the next important turning point in the history of the insurrection.

This chapter considers the activities of the various components of the working class movement during this period, as seen through their clandestine publications, in the light of the changing nature of the class struggle and the escalating government reign of terror. The nature of clandestine publication and distribution inevitably means that there is an unevenness in the archival record; to be caught with an opposition leaflet could have been a death sentence. Nevertheless, there is more than sufficient material in the archives to paint a rich picture of the lively political discussion which must have taken place in the workplaces and poorer neighbourhoods. It is surprising that so little use has been made of these sources; another example, perhaps, of "the condescension of history". A notable exception to this trend is the three volume history of the communist party written by Angelina Rojas.⁵³³ She has made a detailed examination of the archival collections in the Institute of Cuban History (IHC) and volume three of her study, which covers the period of the insurrection, is based upon and makes copious references to the surviving internal documents of the PSP and *Carta Semanal*. This chapter draws upon my study of these same sources, as well as the leaflets, pamphlets and clandestine newspapers in the IHC and provincial archives, along with the personal collections of some surviving militants. It assesses the changes which took place in this period of flux between November 1956 and April 1958. While the dramatic events in the Sierra overshadowed the day to day class struggle, some sectors of the working class showed clear signs of a recovery in confidence during 1957, the extent and nature of which has not previously been considered and will therefore be catalogued here. This recovery caused an exasperated government to respond by including militant workers' representatives among its targets for repression which, in turn, led to a surprising amount of workplace activity aimed at combating the state violence. The failure of these

⁵³³ Rojas, *Primer Partido Comunista de Cuba 3* (2011)

workers to fully defend themselves by traditional trade union action put pressure on both the PSP and the M-26-7.

In particular, the chapter examines the debate over the best way to respond to the increasing government repression, which was taking place both between the PSP and the M-26-7 and internally within these organisations. The ferocity of the government response to any opposition began to move the communist party leadership to reconsider their attitude to armed action and their analysis of the nature of the July 26th Movement. This reconsideration was spurred on by the growing political significance of the rebels and their popularity among sections of the communist party, particularly the youth wing. Theodore Draper claims that there was even a division of opinion in the leadership but, as before, there is no real evidence as discipline was maintained.⁵³⁴ The growing acceptance amongst labour activists of the need for an armed response to state violence resulted in a change in the balance of forces, with the 26th July Movement increasing its implantation in the working class.

Class struggle

The year 1957 started with a wave of demands for large wage increases, with a 20% increase and a \$90 minimum monthly wage being the common demand. While many workers were fearful of the consequences of traditional strike action over economic demands, they still raised those demands in a form which unnerved their employers. While the picture is uneven, it would appear that some groups of workers were better placed to defend their interests than others and that this affected the political conclusions they reached. However, as the level of state violence increased, the major concern of most workers shifted from economic to political questions, leading to a series of strikes in protest at repressive government violence. However, before considering these developments, it may be useful to examine reactions to a wave of attempted victimisations starting in mid-1956, as these show that working class confidence was maintained in some industrial sectors.

There was a brief downturn in the number of reported strikes following the defeat of the sugar workers in January 1955, but the first signs of a revival appeared in mid-1956 when there are some significant disputes against the victimisation of union delegates and threats of closure in the textile industry. The first such strike broke out in

⁵³⁴ Draper, *Castroism* (1965) p.31

July 1956 in the *Fábrica Las Vegas* in Santiago de las Vegas. There is no record of the outcome, but a dispute later the same month in the *Once-Once* textile factory, which was situated in the Havana suburbs, has left better records. In this case, three shop stewards were dismissed following two weeks of industrial action, which took the form of a *huelga de brazos caídos*. The mainly women workers responded to this victimisation by occupying the factory, but were soon expelled by the police. They continued their action outside the gates. After three weeks on strike, with growing local solidarity from workers in other textile factories, the management reinstated the stewards.⁵³⁵ At the same time, there was a week long strike in the Marianao textile factory of *Damián y Hmos.*, which resulted in a wage rise. This was followed by a lockout in the *Betroma SA* factory in Matanzas, which management were threatening to close, unsuccessfully as it turns out, there being later references to other disputes at this workplace.⁵³⁶ There are also reports of a demonstration against the threatened closure of *La Ribon* textile factory in Marianao in January 1957. This was followed by protests against the threat by the management of *La Rayonera* that they would cut 300 jobs for "lack of markets".⁵³⁷ The fiercest struggle, however, took place in *La Concordia Textil SA* in Guanabacoa where the workers resisted a three month lock-out aimed at imposing wage cuts. The factory reopened in February, but there is a surviving leaflet in the Cuban National Archive calling the workers to a mass meeting on 10th April to resist further threats and to resist a potential betrayal by the national union federation.⁵³⁸ Much of the trouble in the textile industry at this time was as a result of competition from cheaper foreign textiles. The government had originally promised a subsidy to assist the local industry, but management claimed that this was no longer forthcoming and were attempting to force through job cuts and threatening to close factories.⁵³⁹ This industrial action provided useful recruits for the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, because the accusations of "dumping" cheap foreign textiles gave increased relevance to their politics of revolutionary nationalism. Indeed, under the leadership of Julián Alemán and Joaquín Torres, the Matanzas provincial office of the textile workers' federation, the FPTT, became a local organising centre for clandestine revolutionary activity.⁵⁴⁰

⁵³⁵ *Carta Semanal* (July 11th, August 22nd & 29th 1956)

⁵³⁶ *Carta Semanal* (July 18th, August 8th 1956)

⁵³⁷ *Carta Semanal* (February 20th 1957)

⁵³⁸ ANC 7-191-1391 *Trabajadores de La Concordia Textil SA* (26th march 1957)

⁵³⁹ *El Imparcial* (9th March 1957)

⁵⁴⁰ García Pérez, *Insurrección y Revolución* (2006) p.104

Another example of resistance to victimisation can be seen in the railway workshops of the *FFCC Unidos* in Luyanó, a working class suburb of Havana. On Friday November 16th 1956 at 10.40 am, Eladio Cid, President of *Delegación 2* of the *Hermandad Ferroviaria* came to the railway workshop and told workers that they must work at weekends because the company was in financial difficulties. At midday, 200 workers out of the 300 employed in the workshops assembled for an impromptu mass meeting which refused to accept the new arrangements. The workers clocked off and went home chanting *!Para trabajo extra, pago extra!* (Extra work, extra pay!). On the following Monday, at 10am, a worker called Gabriel Canut was suspended without pay because of the speech he had made at the meeting on the previous Friday. All 300 workers rushed to the office shouting that they would not work until he was reinstated. The police were called but, by the time they arrived, the workers had left the workshop and gone down to the train terminal, where they persuaded the train crews to stop working. Just before 11pm that evening, Canut was reinstated and weekend working without pay abandoned subject to future discussions.⁵⁴¹ There was another strike in the same workshop against more attempted victimisations in January but, with management unable to force through the dismissals, 5 workers were arrested by the police.⁵⁴² Management finally succeeding in dismissing 20 workers in February 1957 with the help of the police, although unpaid weekend working was never imposed.⁵⁴³

The events in the textile and railway industries described above were essentially defensive, but show a recovery in confidence. A more offensive approach was displayed by the Caibarién dockers in the early part of 1957, when they felt strong enough to take action in order to enforce the agreed manning levels. In this particular case, they struck the port for several days to ensure that the full complement of workers were employed loading the sugar freighter "Aida"; management had employed one fewer than the contract specified. It is clear from the way this strike is reported that both sides realised that more was at stake than just one man's job; the breaking of the agreed contract was viewed by the dockers as the thin end of the wedge.⁵⁴⁴ This is perhaps untypical of the general feeling of the time, but evidence that a few groups of workers had managed to survive the bruising struggles of 1955-6 with their confidence intact. More significant,

⁵⁴¹ *Carta Semanal* (November 28th & December 12th 1956)

⁵⁴² *Carta Semanal* (January 9th & 16th 1957)

⁵⁴³ *Carta Semanal* (February 20th 1957)

⁵⁴⁴ Parrado & Pérez, *Breve relato histórico del sector marítimo-portuario de Caibarién* (1972) p.162

however, was the return to militant activity by the bus drivers of Havana who had been uncharacteristically quiet during the early part of the Batista era.

During the summer of 1956, the Havana bus drivers raised the demand for paid meal breaks and stopped work over a demand for the reinstatement of 60 duties, which had been cut four years previously.⁵⁴⁵ At the start of 1957, management of the two Havana bus companies refused to pay a traditional bonus which gave bus drivers an extra month's pay at New Year. The drivers in the depot of *Autobuses Modernos* that operated routes 23, 24 and 25 were the first to react by going on strike. The strike quickly spread until it affected 90% of the fleet, by which time management backed down and agreed to pay half immediately and the remainder on January 5th. Threatened with a similar response from the drivers of the other company, *Omnibus Aliados*, this company's management offered a payment of \$50 in cash.⁵⁴⁶ It should be stressed that, similarly to the Caibarién dockers, this was seen by the bus workers as protection of their traditional rights from erosion; the original agreement for an extra month's salary at Christmas was negotiated as a form of savings scheme to enable workers to have extra money to celebrate with their families. On the other hand, the employers clearly felt that they were paying a month's wages for nothing and it became an obvious target for economies in strained economic circumstances. Rather like the dispute over the sugar workers' *diferencial* at the end of 1955, this is another example of the gulf of comprehension that existed between workers and their employers in such matters.

This renewed militancy continued in March 1957 with a partial strike on routes 30 and 57 operated by *Omnibus Aliados* in protest at a cut of 18 duties. This was followed by a general refusal of all Havana drivers to operate the newly purchased larger 45 seater buses, as this would have enabled the same number of passengers to be carried by fewer drivers, thus potentially reducing the number of drivers employed.⁵⁴⁷ Another strike broke out on route 79 in April to protest at the arrest of two bus drivers, followed by a similar incident on route 19 in May. In these last two strikes, strikebreaking soldiers drove buses, which would have contributed to the bad feeling that led to a half hour strike on routes 21 and 22 in November against the arrest of a colleague who had refused to pick up a soldier between stops.⁵⁴⁸ The *Omnibus Aliados* workers were also numbered amongst the union groups supporting the PSP's 1957 wage campaign,

⁵⁴⁵ IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/31-33 CNDDO "Reunión nacional" (October 1956)

⁵⁴⁶ *Carta Semanal* (January 2nd & 16th 1957)

⁵⁴⁷ *Carta Semanal* (29th March 1957)

⁵⁴⁸ *Carta Semanal* (17th April, 29th May, 20th November 1957)

discussed below, linking a 20% wage claim with the demand for compensation for driving the new, larger buses.

The Havana bus workers had a long and militant history. Their strike had started the anti-Machado rebellion in 1933 and they were amongst the few sectors who had struck both in support of Lazaro Peña during the 1947 anti-communist purges of the CTC, as well as in protest at Batista's coup in 1952 (described in chapter 2 above). However, they had been quiet ever since the arrest of the union leader Marco Hirigoyen and the dismissal of 600 drivers in July 1952.⁵⁴⁹ I would argue that this return to form by the Havana bus workers, perhaps influenced by the activity of the sectoral CDDO (described in Chapter 4 above), is symptomatic of a more general discontent, characterised by increased pressure for wage increases.⁵⁵⁰

Some time in the summer of 1956, sensing a change in mood, the PSP decided to conduct a campaign for a 20% increase and a \$90 per month minimum wage for all workers. The report of the October national meeting of the CNDDO contains a very detailed argument about sugar workers' wages. It argued that the forthcoming *zafra* would be 5 million tons and that the price had held up because of the poor harvest in Europe. This had resulted in large profits for the employers, for example the *Vertientes Camagüey Sugar Company*, whose profits rose from \$392,900 in 1953, to \$485,000 in 1954 and \$794,200 in 1955. Salary reductions for the workers caused by wage cuts and shorter *zafras* compared to 1952 resulted in considerably lower wage bills for the



Figure 23: Cartoon, from *Carta Semanal* (September 11th 1956)

employers: for 1953 a total reduction of \$157m, for 1954 the wage bill was \$160m less, for 1955 the reduction was \$186m. Nineteen fifty-six saw a slight recovery, but the total was still \$181m less than 1952. *Intensivismo* and mechanisation had produced a situation where a *zafra* of 5 million tons, which would have taken 145 days in 1925, could be gathered in a mere 88 days in 1957. All this led *Carta Semanal* to the conclusion that the claim should be for a 20% increase, accompanied by the demand for full payment of the *diferencial* and a

⁵⁴⁹ FO 371/97516 - AK1015/33 (1952) - *Political Situation in Cuba*

⁵⁵⁰ IHC 1/8:13A1/5A1/1-4 CDDO, "A todos los trabajadores de los Ómnibus Aliados" (July 1956)

prompt start to the pre-harvest repairs (see Figure 23).⁵⁵¹ The PSP's intervention in the sugar workers' wage debate was implemented by large numbers of leaflets, both nationally and locally produced, aimed at propagating the policy.⁵⁵²

The campaign for a 20% increase appears to have struck a chord with workers across a range of sectors, as illustrated in Table 5 below listing wage claims submitted in the first half of 1957. While these reports come from *Carta Semanal*, there is some independent verification in the legal press, for example *El Mundo* records the fact that the Havana bus drivers were demanding a 20% rise.⁵⁵³ The U.S. Embassy also reports "Mounting Pressure for Wage and Salary Increases".⁵⁵⁴

Date	Location	Organization	Claim
9 Jan	Havana	Omnibus Aliados	Demand 20% wage increase
13 Feb & 27 Mar	Matanzas	Henequeneros	Demand equal pay in whole of agriculture, based on parity with the highest paid. Management threaten lock-out
13 Feb	Havana	Omnibus Aliados	Demand for 20% wage rise to compensate for larger 45 seat buses
20 Feb	Federación Nacional de Comercio		Demand 20% wage increase
27 Feb	Havana	Gastronomicos	Demand \$90 minimum wage and 20% wage rise
6 Mar	Federación Nacional de Calzado		Demand wage increase
6 Mar	Havana	Ten-cents (Woolworth)	Demand \$90 minimum and 20% increase
6 Mar	Luyamo	Metalúrgicos	Metalworkers demand wage rise
20 Mar	Havana	Sindicato de Laboratorios	Mass meeting demands 20% increase
20 Mar	Havana	Tuberias santiarias	Demand 20%
20 Mar	Las Villas	Banks	Demand 20%
27 Mar	Havana	Hotel Sevilla	Demand 20%
27 Mar	Havana	Fabrica Larrañaga	Tabaqueros demand 20%
27 Mar	Havana	Hotel Sevilla	Demand 20%
27 Mar	Provincia de la Habana	Central Portugalete	Two short strikes win a 10% wage increase
27 Mar	Havana	Hotel Sevilla	Demand 20%

⁵⁵¹ IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/31-33 CNDDO "Reunión nacional" (October 1956)

⁵⁵² IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/22 CNDDO "Llamamiento a los obreros azucareros" (July 1956)

IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/23 CNDDO "Trabajador azucarero" (October 4th 1956)

IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/49 CNDDO "¡Trabajadores azucareros!" (March 20th 1957)

IHC 1/8:13A1/12.1/1-2 CNDDO "Reunión azucareros de Las Villas" (October 14th 1956)

IHC 1/8:13A1/12.1/1-2 CDDO de Puerto Padre - "A los obreros azucareros" (November 1956)

⁵⁵³ *El Mundo* (December 2nd 1956)

⁵⁵⁴ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 610 (March 21, 1957) *Labor Briefs for February, 1957*

3 Apr	Havana	Hotels	Hotels Vedado, Comodoro and Nacional demand \$90 and 20% rise
17 April	Havana	Federación bancaria	Demand 30%
29 May	Caibarién	Dockers	Mass meetings protest at high cost of living
5 June	Havana	Brewery workers	Assembly demands 20% wage rise
5 June	Santiago	Bacardi	Assembly demands 20% wage rise
12 June		Goodyear	Newly elected union committee present list of demands, including 30% wage increase
12 June	San José de las Lajas	Metalworkers	Publish a manifesto demanding 20% increase and express solidarity with <i>Concordia textil</i> .
12 June		Textil La Sedentia	Assembly demands 20% wage rise
19 June	Caibarién	Stevedores	Motion to FOMN demanding 20% increase

Some official bodies such as the *Federacion Nacional Gastronómica*, which represented workers in the tourist industry, took up the demand and set up *Comités de Lucha*. However these official committees were organised in such a way as to make sure that they did not escape bureaucratic control, but rather representing a tokenist response to a popular demand. They were not given the authority to initiate action. Nevertheless, the fact that the bureaucracy felt the need for such a gesture is testimony to the popularity of the wage demands.⁵⁵⁵ By February 1957, similar pressure from below had also forced the *Federación Nacional de Comercio* (shop workers) and the *Federación Nacional de Calzado* (footwear) to formally raise the demand for 20%.⁵⁵⁶ These wage demands were rarely pursued by official industrial action because of a mixture of bureaucratic inertia within the official structure and fear of state violence amongst the rank and file. However, the widespread popularity of such a large figure for a wage claim indicates that many workers did not feel that they were sharing in the prosperity so often mentioned by supporters of the regime.⁵⁵⁷ Moreover, these demands would have worried many employers who must have hoped that, by now, their employees would be sufficiently cowed to enable further advances in productivity without undue difficulty.

The tightened censorship means that there is little useful reportage in the legal press after March 1957. We therefore have to rely on reports in *Carta Semanal*. The PSP had a political interest in playing up the number of strikes, but while there appears to be

⁵⁵⁵ *Carta Semanal* (September 11th 1956)

⁵⁵⁶ *Carta Semanal* (February 20th, March 6th 1956)

⁵⁵⁷ Baklanoff, *Cuba on the Eve of the Socialist Transition* (1998) p.262

Smith & Llorens, *Renaissance and Decay* (1998) p.247-259

Cuba Transition Project, *Socio-Economic Conditions in Pre-Castro Cuba* (2008)

a measure of effervescence in terms of demands, protest meetings etc., very little of this develops into strikes or public demonstrations. Given the level of repression, particularly the increased use of government death squads, this is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, the defensive strikes and the agitation over wages described above lends weight to the argument that the repressive activity of the Batista regime had not succeeded in its aim to create a "more disciplined and docile workforce".⁵⁵⁸ Rather, the focus for working class activity shifted as many militants sought ways of restoring their bargaining position by taking action against state repression.

Reign of Terror

If there was not much direct industrial action over wages in this period, there was a surprisingly militant response to the spate of beatings, murders and disappearances with which the government greeted the start of the armed rebellion in the Sierra Maestra. This government violence was not merely aimed at supporters of the rebels in the Sierra, but was equally used to remove troublesome workers' leaders irrespective of their political persuasion.



Figure 24: Trial of the November 30th combatants in Santiago, from Coma, *El Movimiento 26 de Julio en Guantánamo* (1981)

The government responded furiously to the outbreak of armed rebellion in Oriente. Following the events of November 30th 1956, there were 40 arrests, 17 from Guantánamo city and 23 from the *Ermita* sugar refinery (see Figure 24). One of the arrested, Luis

Raposo, was tortured to death, while Arnaldo García González was not even arrested, simply murdered by a government death squad on the 9th December. Most of the arrested were later released, but six received sentences of between three and six years in the Isle of Pines. Many others, including Julio Comacho, Octavio Louit and Níco Torres had to leave their jobs and go underground.

⁵⁵⁸ Morley, *Imperial State and Revolution* (1987) p.39

The murder of members of the opposition was not confined to the Guantánamo region. The most notorious case was the so-called *pascuas sangrientas* in which, on Christmas Day 1956, 24 people from the Holguin district were killed by soldiers of Regiment number 8 and police of the 7th Division under the command of Colonel Firmin Cowley; some were shot while others were hanged from trees near their homes. At the same time, two more oppositionists were shot in Santiago. Amongst the dead were members of all opposition parties, including several members of the PSP. The PSP formally denounced Colonel Cowley to the Supreme Court, but unsurprisingly to no avail.⁵⁵⁹ This incident would be the start of a government policy of using death squads to eliminate suspected rank and file workers' leaders in the aftermath of confrontations with rebel fighters. Inevitably, many of the victims were not politically active, merely being in the wrong place at the wrong time.⁵⁶⁰ This heightened level of semi-official repression was combined with the suspension of constitutional guarantees and the formal introduction of press censorship.⁵⁶¹

Despite these killings, the British Ambassador felt that "*one is far from having the feeling of living in a police state*" and that Batista "*appears to have the real interests of his country at heart*".⁵⁶² The restrictions, which by most standards would merit the description "police state", were reported by the embassy as follows:

- a) *The right of assembly and procession is limited*
- b) *Freedom of speech and writing is limited. Newspapers and periodicals are subject to pre-censorship before issue.*
- c) *Private correspondence, private documents and telephonic, telegraphic and cable communications are subject to censoring and monitoring*
- d) *Free entry into, exit from and movement within the national frontiers is subject to control.*
- e) *No plea of habeas corpus may be made in respect of detained persons.*
- f) *The clause laying down that detained persons may only be tried or condemned by a competent tribunal is suspended.*
- g) *The clauses of the penal procedure code establishing that an accused person must be considered innocent until his guilt is proved, that he may not be held incommunicado, and that persons accused of political offences should be kept separate from those accused of common crime, are all suspended.*⁵⁶³

⁵⁵⁹ ANC 5-74-868 *PSP al Tribunal Supremo* (December 28th 1956)

⁵⁶⁰ *Carta Semanal* (January 2nd & 9th 1957)

"Navidades de Sangre" *Bohemia* (January 6th 1957) reproduced in Osa, *En Cuba* (2008) pp.351-358

⁵⁶¹ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 389 (January 3, 1957) *26 killed in Holguin; Sabotage at Chaparra and Delicias Sugar Mills; Shooting at Nicaro*

⁵⁶² FO371/126466 - AK1012/2 *Report on leading personalities in Cuba* (January 1957)

⁵⁶³ FO 371/126467 - AK1015/3 *Effect of decree suspending constitutional guarantees* (January 1957)

Relaxed at the beginning of March 1957, these restrictions were soon reimposed following an attack on the presidential palace by militants of the *Directorio Revolucionario* led by José Antonio Echeverría on 13 March 1957. Thereafter, for most of the rest of the period of dictatorship, researchers are reliant almost entirely on clandestine publications for historical information on opposition activity, as the legally published press is silent on practically all matters which do not reflect to the credit of the government.

The army, rural guard and police were clearly profiting from the situation to remove some troublesome workers' leaders. For example, in an incident at the *central Delicias*, not only were two PSP members murdered, but the secretary of the local union was only saved from abduction by the rural guard by the prompt actions of his daughters, who created enough of a commotion that the neighbourhood was alerted and the would-be abductors driven off.⁵⁶⁴



Figure 25: Women's Demonstration, Santiago, January 1957 from <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/cuban-revolution.htm>

This government policy of employing death squads can be seen developing in early 1957, with the Santiago newspapers containing frequent stories of the discovery of the dead bodies of young people who had been shot after being beaten and tortured.⁵⁶⁵ It was quite common for a Jeep full of plain-clothes police or off-duty soldiers to arrive outside the house of an opponent of the regime and shoot him in front of his family and

⁵⁶⁴ *Carta Semanal* (January 9th 1957)

⁵⁶⁵ Poveda Diaz, *Propaganda y revolución en Santiago* (2003) pp220-224

neighbours. *Carta Semanal* contains numerous reports of communists being killed in this period, with a common method being the reported release of the victim following a period of incarceration and then their body being subsequently found hanged from a tree near their home, with the official verdict being suicide.⁵⁶⁶

The most public demonstration in response to these assassinations occurred in Santiago following the discovery of the bodies of five young men, all having been tortured before being shot.⁵⁶⁷ Over a thousand women, lead by relatives of the slain, attempted to hold a protest but were dispersed by the police (see Figure 25). This caused a stir in the press and contributed to the restoration of censorship following a brief relaxation.⁵⁶⁸

It has already been noted that the police normally proved less likely to use the same level of violence against women that they showed towards men. When this proved not to be the case, the maltreatment of women roused greater indignation, as can be seen by the shocked reaction of the newly appointed US Ambassador when women were attacked by police using fire hoses while they were attempting to give him a protest letter during a visit to Santiago (see Figure 26).⁵⁶⁹



Figure 26: Women's demonstration in Santiago August 1957 dispersed by police using fire hoses, from <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/cuban-revolution.htm>

Despite the censorship, which meant that many of the protests against state violence in the 1957 have gone unreported, there is a record of a number of short strikes, sometimes only lasting 5 or 10 minutes, in Havana in April and in Layunó, Caibarién, Cabaiguán and Remedios later in the year.⁵⁷⁰ There is also a record of some short strikes against violence in

⁵⁶⁶ *Carta Semanal* (January 23rd, April 10th 1957)

⁵⁶⁷ *Carta Semanal* (January 16th 1957)

⁵⁶⁸ Ramos Estives, *Apoyo de la mujer santiaguera a la lucha contra la tiranía de Batista* (1984) p.22

⁵⁶⁹ *New York Times* (August 1st 1957) p.8

Ramos Estives, *Apoyo de la mujer santiaguera a la lucha contra la tiranía de Batista* (1984)

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 93 (July 31, 1957) *Ambassador Smith holds press conference*

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 107 (Aug. 7, 1957) *Ambassador visits Oriente*

⁵⁷⁰ *Carta Semanal* (April 10th, October 23rd & November 6th 1957)

the railway workshops of *FFCC Consolidados*.⁵⁷¹ An incident in the Ciénaga workshop described by Zanetti and García serves as an example that was repeated in many other workplaces. José Ramirez Casamayor, a PSP militant, had recently returned to work after a period of imprisonment for his political activities, when a security guard on the gate of the workshop calmly shot him dead in front of his workmates. There was a short work stoppage and a demonstration at his funeral, but the killings continued.⁵⁷² It may be assumed that some of the workers in Ciénaga decided that sterner measures were necessary, as a group of railway workers led by veteran militants Ricardo Rodríguez and Emilio Delachaux began using the workshop facilities to prepare explosive devices.⁵⁷³

An example of the new realities for organised workers can be found in the Santiago docks, where a M-26-7 cell had been established by Santiago Casacó, a long-standing and well-established activist. The police tried to clean up the port by means of arrests, vandalising the local union offices and similar acts of repression. In reply, in January 1958, person or persons unknown shot and killed Filipe Navea, a well-known pro-government official of the FOMN, the dockworkers' union, in the port of Santiago. Colonel Río Chaviano, military governor of the town, responded by killing 5 dockers in their homes and the dockers, in turn, replied with increased sabotage such as the burning of a sugar warehouse in February 1958.⁵⁷⁴ Such tit-for-tat violence continued, albeit on a lower scale, up to the end of 1958.

While strikes and demonstrations were important for the developing mood of resistance to an increasingly brutal and dictatorial regime, in themselves they were insufficient to defeat the government or even to force meaningful change in government policy. Many rank and file PSP members were coming to recognise the inadequacy of the tactic that the party referred to as "*la lucha de masas*". KS Karol's argument that 1957 saw the increasing popularity of the M-26-7 among the rank and file PSP members is certainly borne out in the case of Manzanillo, where the most successful mass action in the early part of 1957 took the form of a town-wide general strike to protest against police and army brutality on 28th January 1957. This was supported by partial action in Santiago and Contramaeste.⁵⁷⁵ Manzanillo had always been a communist party

⁵⁷¹ *Carta Semanal* (January 28th, February 6th)

⁵⁷² Zanetti & García, *Caminos para azúcar* (1987) pp.375-7

⁵⁷³ *Bohemia* (March 3rd 1957) p.9

⁵⁷⁴ *Carta Semanal* (January 28th 1958)

Coya, *El movimiento obrero en Santiago* (1982) p.76

⁵⁷⁵ Karol, *Guerrillas in Power* (1970) p.150

Carta Semanal (February 20th 1956)

stronghold; it was, after all, the home town of the party leader Blas Roca, and was now the nearest town of any size to the rebels in the Sierra Maestra. There was a personal relationship between many local militants of the PSP and the M-26-7 in Manzanillo. Local communists, particularly members of the party's youth wing, *Juventud Socialista*, often helped in the support networks for the rebel army, although how much of this was known by the leadership in Havana is uncertain.⁵⁷⁶ When *Carta Semanal* refers to the activity of a *Frente Unico de Oposición* (United Opposition Front) in opposition to a pro-government rally in Manzanillo, they are careful to speak of the support of "members of the 26th July Movement" rather than of the organisation itself.⁵⁷⁷ The importance of personal relationships in neighbourhoods and workplaces is often underestimated when considering the development of resistance to authoritarian regimes, where the success of any clandestine activity will depend to a large extent on personal trust, which is frequently more important than political differences.

While there is evidence of co-operation at local level in Manzanillo, there was still considerable distance between the manner in which the two organisations were organising against the government's campaign of terror. The PSP's response in its stronghold of Manzanillo was a simple withdrawal of labour. In contrast, the day the dead body of Rafael Orejón, leader of the M-26-7 cell in Nicaro, was returned to his family in Guantánamo, the workers in the electrical plant sabotaged the machinery and plunged the town into darkness for the whole night.⁵⁷⁸

If strikes such as that which took place in January in Manzanillo are the normal first reaction of workers when confronted with repression, the ever increasing level of violence with which the state responded quickly overwhelmed such attempts based on a single district. This lent weight to the arguments of the July 26th Movement in favour of the armed struggle. The situation was extremely complex in which rank and file militants were grappling with competing strategies. The success or failure in winning support for either *la lucha de masas* or *la lucha armada* amongst the uncommitted would have encouraged or discouraged the proponents of that approach at leadership level. We have no record of such local discussions, but a careful reading of the leaflets, pamphlets and periodicals produced by opponents of the regime suggests that there were impassioned debates between advocates of the alternative positions. While such

⁵⁷⁶ Interview with *Daniel Orozco*, Historiador de Manzanillo, (March 2009)

Interview with *María Antúnez*, former PSP militant, (March 2009)

⁵⁷⁷ *Carta Semanal* (27th March 1957)

⁵⁷⁸ Sección de historia, *Reseña histórica de Guantánamo* (1985) p.131

discussions by their nature would have been held behind closed doors, the written sources provide an indication of the kind of issues that were raised. I would argue that the ability of ordinary workers to influence the decisions of their leaders is very frequently underestimated and that this is particularly true in circumstances where two organised political tendencies are competing for influence in a particular arena.

Competition and collaboration

The historiography of the Cuban insurrection has made scant use of the surviving clandestine propaganda material available in the archives, yet a study of these documents gives us a valuable glimpse of the ways in which the competing strategies for overthrowing the regime were argued out. They are a valuable guide to the relationship between supporters of the communist party and supporters of the July 26th rebels, not only at leadership level, but also at the grass roots. Increased state terror, particularly where this was directed against working class organisation, makes the question of collaboration between different opposition organisations a matter of urgency. Therefore the relationship between the M-26-7 and the PSP starts to take on greater significance at this time. As the 26th July Movement extended its political and organisational reach, the two organisations came into increased contact, thus raising the question of how their relationship functioned on a practical level, despite their ideological and tactical differences. While they were in competition for membership and influence, they were also confronted with decisions about possible co-operation. This section looks at the printed statements of both organisations to assess their formal political positions and then goes on to examine the daily practical application of these positions. A pattern can be seen emerging as the politics of the PSP and the M-26-7 started to converge and the first signs of growing practical collaboration appear. This convergence was most pronounced in the milieu of the workplace where attitudes to collaborative activity were particularly relevant, both because of the pressures for joint action imposed by everyday industrial relations problems and because militant workers were most likely to suffer the same dangers from the increased state terror.

In July 1957, the M-26-7 launched an underground newspaper, aimed at labour, under the name of *Vanguardia Obrera*. This paper was an extension to national level of the previously existing paper from Guantánamo entitled *Línea Obrera*.⁵⁷⁹ Early editions of *Vanguardia Obrera* were amateurishly produced, using Roneo duplicators and a more

⁵⁷⁹ Coma, *El Movimiento 26 de Julio en Guantánamo* (1981) pp.46 & 54

professionally printed appearance is not seen until mid-1958. The main reason for the difference in appearance between the *Vanguardia Obrera* and *Carta Semanal* is the relatively well established position of the latter. When the pre-existing PSP newspaper, *Hoy*, was banned in 1953, it had not been difficult to establish a distribution network for its underground replacement amongst a party membership with a tradition of selling papers to their workmates. Indeed, *Hoy* had been briefly closed down in 1951 and the first volume of *Carta Semanal*, produced for a few months in that year, had served as a dry run for the more serious conditions of clandestinity prevailing under the dictatorship.⁵⁸⁰ The M-26-7 had no such previous experience on which to base their practice. *Carta Semanal* also had an established political line, as well as a network of militants used to reporting local disputes. *Vanguardia Obrera*, on the other hand, was attempting to represent the ideas of a much more politically diverse organisation whose working class members rarely had the experience of being "worker correspondents". Therefore the M-26-7 paper was more prone to general exhortations to revolution without specifying the nature of that revolution. Moreover, the M-26-7 leadership had not yet learned the lesson of the sugar strike, which had shown the importance of the economic struggles in radicalising workers, and thus ignored the PSP's insistence on the importance of raising "immediate demands".⁵⁸¹

Local groupings of both organisations produced more simple material such as extracts taken from longer articles in the main newspaper, leaflets and bulletins commenting on local issues or disputes and small flyers for distribution at random from passing cars. A number of such leaflets have survived in the personal collection of Reinaldo Suárez of the University of Oriente, with a particularly important set having been produced by the local PSP branch in Luyanó. These, mainly dated around the end of 1957 and the beginning of 1958, give us an insight into the political debates and forms of organisation in this Havana suburb. They are hand typed and duplicated, but set out with considerable care. Amongst the surviving examples are bulletins aimed at the workers in the mineral water factory "*El Copey*", the "*Aldesa*" food distribution depot, the "*Hatuey*" brewery and the railway workshops, as well as more general leaflets aimed at particular trades such as lorry drivers and wood workers. The survival of leaflets from over 50 years ago must be a matter of chance and we can assume that

⁵⁸⁰ U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 455 (1950) *Cuban Government Intervenes Communist Newspaper Hoy*

⁵⁸¹ Rodríguez, *José Antonio Echeverría y la clase obrera* (1967) p.55
Carta Semanal (28th August 1957) p.1

Luyanó was far from the only place where such initiatives were undertaken. These leaflets appear to have been issued outside the workplace, but are clearly based on detailed information from within. In addition to the commentary on matters of immediate concern to the particular group of workers addressed, there are some common themes: the need for unity, the fight against state repression, the betrayals of the *mujalista* bureaucracy and the superiority of the old CTC under the leadership of Lazaro Peña.

A series of leaflets, entitled "*Bolos*" and aimed at the woodworking industry, show the political dilemma faced by the PSP. On the one hand they wished to push their line of "Mass action" and opposition to what they saw as terrorism, while on the other, in order to campaign against the arrest and murder of their militants, they needed to work together with groups that they defined as "terrorist", most particularly the M-26-7.⁵⁸² In Luyanó this was accomplished by setting up the *Comité*

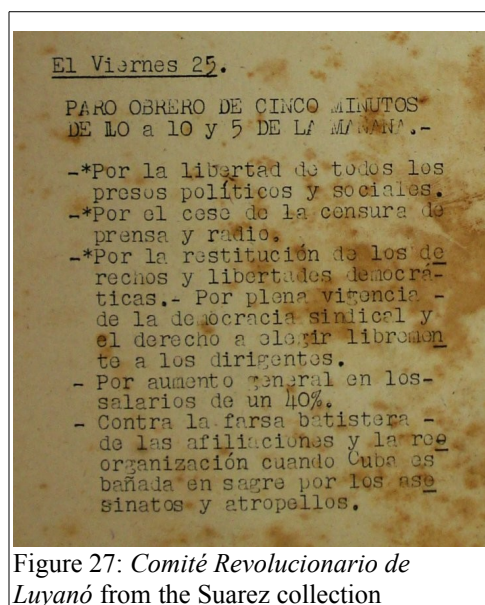


Figure 27: *Comité Revolucionario de Luyanó* from the Suarez collection

Revolucionario de Luyanó (Luyano Revolutionary Committee), which speaks in the name of the PSP, the local CDDO, *26 de Julio* and other revolutionary organisations. A leaflet produced by this committee calls for a strike of 5 to 10 minutes on Friday 25th October 1957.⁵⁸³ As well as conventional leaflets, the Luyanó committee produced smaller flyers (see Figure 27) that were typed four to a page which was then quartered. These were designed to be scattered from the windows of a speeding car.⁵⁸⁴ The success of such initiatives can be seen from the report in *Carta Semanal* which records that the strike in Luyanó was observed in 10 factories and that similar 5 or 10 minute strikes took place in Caibarién, Cabaiguán and Remedios, crediting the local united front committees for organising the action.⁵⁸⁵

A larger leaflet, issued to call the strike in Luyanó is interesting in a number of ways. It specifically refers to the differences in programme and conception of revolution

⁵⁸² *Bolos*, Suarez collection (January 8th, 13th, 16th, 18th 1958) [copy in author's possession]

⁵⁸³ "Compañeros", *Comité Revolucionario de Luyanó* (October 1957) Suarez collection [copy in author's possession]

⁵⁸⁴ "El Viernes 25", *Comité Revolucionario de Luyanó* (October 1957) Suarez collection [copy in author's possession]

⁵⁸⁵ *Carta Semanal* (October 23rd, November 6th 1957)

held by the constituent organisations, but states that, by uniting forces, the dictatorship can be overthrown. Moreover, the form taken is of an open letter, calling for unity, addressed to the national leaderships of the constituent organisations and others such as the students' union (FEU) and the *Directorio Revolucionario*. This initiative can be read as reflecting Karol's assertion that the end of 1957 saw the increasing popularity of the M-26-7 amongst the rank and file of the PSP.⁵⁸⁶ There is also evidence in the *Instituto de Historia de Cuba* of the existence of a *Comité de Frente Unico de Trabajadores de la Roselia* (Roselia Workers' United Front Committee) and a *Comité Obrero Revolucionario de San Miguel del Padrón* (San Miguel del Padrón Revolutionary Workers' Committee), both of which address themselves to the leaderships of all revolutionary opposition groupings in a similar way to the Luyanó committee. A leaflet from the San Miguel committee dated March 1958 is particularly interesting in that, on the one hand it uses the PSP formula "*por un gobierno representativo de amplia coalición democrática*" (for a government representing a broad democratic coalition), while on the other hand salutes the heroic guerrillas in the mountains using language reminiscent of the M-26-7.⁵⁸⁷ We have no way of knowing the extent to which sections of the leadership of either the M-26-7 and the PSP encouraged these local united fronts, but they coincided with the first negotiations between the two organisations which began when the veteran communist sugar worker, Ursinio Rojas arrived in the Sierra Maestra for discussions with Fidel Castro, sometime in October 1957.⁵⁸⁸ Clearly, the leaders of the PSP now recognised the political importance of the M-26-7 and were well aware that they were competing with them for influence in a working class that the communists had previously thought of as their private constituency.

Towards the end of 1957, the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera* also came to be referred to as the *Frente Obrero Nacional* (FON).⁵⁸⁹ This name change was portrayed by the 26th July Movement as an opening out to other political tendencies, but at this stage was little more than a re-branding exercise, albeit a successful one as the M-26-7 grew in numbers and influence within organised labour. As a result, it came into greater contact with the PSP, which concretely posed the question of their practical relationship. An abstract call for "unity" is easy to make, the practical application of the slogan is much

⁵⁸⁶ Karol, *Guerrillas in Power* (1970) p.150

⁵⁸⁷ IHC 1/8:13/27.1/1 Comité Obrero Revolucionario de San Miguel del Padrón, "*¡Obreros Hermanos!*" (March 1958)

⁵⁸⁸ Farber, *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006) p.156

⁵⁸⁹ Orozco, *Interview with Níco Torres* (1990)

more difficult. In December 1957 *Vanguardia Obrera*, asks the question "¿Unidad con quiénes?" (Unity with whom?). This is only answered in the vaguest of terms, completely sidestepping the relationships with the communists. It seems likely that this ambiguity was deliberate to enable the July 26th movement the maximum freedom of manoeuvre. Later in the same edition, another article calls upon all other revolutionary organisations to help build the FON from the base, as the organisation that would have responsibility for launching a revolutionary general strike to overthrow the dictatorship.⁵⁹⁰ Thus we see that the M-26-7 clearly saw itself as the directing organisation of the revolution and that other oppositionists had to accept their lead; "unity" was to be on their terms. Such an approach was a practical possibility for those in a leadership position charged with producing editorial content for a national paper. However, those militants at local level who had the task of implementing the party line found themselves having to take a more nuanced approach.

A long-established unofficial network of M-26-7, Communist Party and independent militants operated in Oriente province, a good example being the way in which employees of the *FFCC Consolidados* railway network were able to coordinate their militant activities⁵⁹¹. The M-26-7 had established its influence on the *FFCC Consolidados* at a relatively early stage in its development, partly because of the work of the Guantánamo group, but also through Pepito Tey, who was an express messenger between Camagüey and Santiago. In an interview recorded in 1978, Armando Yuñuz, a Santiago railway worker and M-26-7 militant, recalls that by June 1955 there was already a sabotage cell of 12 railwaymen in the city and that, by the time of 30th November rising, they had 33 train crew, 9 express agents, 5 in track maintenance, 7 in the workshop, 5 in the cafeteria and 2 porters. Of these, Gerardo Poll and Efraín Palencia are listed as collaborating PSP members.⁵⁹² Similarly, in another oral testimony given in 1984, Rogelio Arógestegui of the M-26-7 and Alvaro Vázquez Galago of the PSP speak of working together on the railways in Camagüey, although they say that this occurred against the wishes of the middle class local leadership of the M-26-7, commenting that the workers had a different attitude to other social classes. They also criticise the PSP leadership for being slow to recognise the 26th July movement as a

⁵⁹⁰ IHC 1/17/3/21/7-14 *Vanguardia Obrera* "Obrero ¡Hacia el FON!" (December 5th 1957)

⁵⁹¹ Zanetti & García, *Sugar and Railroads* (1998) p.394

⁵⁹² Portuondo Lopez, *José Tey* (2006) pp.293-4

Mendoza Bú, *El movimiento 26 de julio en el sector ferroviario en Santiago de Cuba* (1988) pp.32-36

potential ally.⁵⁹³ We know of similar collaboration between working class militants of the two organisations in Vázquez, near Puerto Padre in Las Tunas, northern Oriente province.⁵⁹⁴ Equally, in the Bacardí factory in Santiago de Cuba a *Comité del Frente Único* (United Front Committee) had existed since 1954 when a group of *Auténticos* and *Ortodoxos*, later to form the July 26th *Sección Obrera* in the factory, joined with their PSP colleagues to protest at the official CTC refusal to allow Juan Taquechel the right to speak at the Mayday rally.⁵⁹⁵ The effectiveness of this joint work is confirmed by the repeated mutual support between the Santiago dockers, led by communists, and the Bacardí workers, the majority of whose leadership were supporters of the M-26-7.

It is clear from the study of the propaganda material of the period that there was a political flux as the leaderships wrestled with the problems of their chosen strategies. We also get a glimpse of the ways in which politics at local level developed and affected the official "party line" of both organisations. However, despite the increasing talk of "unity", it must never be forgotten that, despite the political convergence between them, the communists and the rebels were both manoeuvring for leadership of the resistance to Batista.

Conclusion

The *Granma* landing in December 1956 represents a qualitative change in working class involvement in the revolutionary process in Cuba. Before this time, class conscious workers had attempted to defend their interests by the more or less traditional means of strikes and demonstrations, while the government had, with some notable exceptions, successfully defeated them with the help of a corrupt trade union bureaucracy. The police and security forces had freely used clubs and fire hoses, only occasionally opening fire, but generally kept their use of force within bounds. From the beginning of 1957, there was an escalation in the level of state violence against civilians, particularly in the east. This intimidation significantly reduced the number of strikes, although it does not seem to have reconciled workers to accepting their lot. They may have been cowed, but they had not been broken and there is clear evidence of a search for an alternative strategy to defend their rights and livelihoods.

⁵⁹³ Rodríguez López & Martínez Rodríguez, *La huelga de 9 de abril de 1958 en la ciudad de Camagüey* (1984)

⁵⁹⁴ Reyes Pérez & Batista López, *El movimiento 26 de julio en los municipios de Tunas y Puerto Padre* (n/d) p.53

⁵⁹⁵ Coya, *El movimiento obrero en Santiago* (1982) pp.31-4

The strikes in textiles, the railways and on the Havana buses were essentially defensive, seeking to preserve traditional bonuses, to prevent the victimisation of local union union activists or to stop threatened redundancies or closures. Unofficial industrial action can be very effective in defending the *status-quo*, it is much less so when offensive action is required, for instance in the case of wage claims, which are most successful when there is organisation extending beyond the individual workplace. This requires either the support of the trade union bureaucracy or a well-established and widespread unofficial network. Thus, although the PSP's campaign for a 20% wage increase received widespread support, the CTC official structures were not going to organise the industrial action required and the PSP itself did not have the capability of setting strikes in motion unofficially in the face of escalating state terror.

A closer look at the list of those workers supporting the 20% claim shows them to be largely Havana based. However, by 1957, workers in the east of the island were becoming more concerned with government repression, which was much fiercer in Oriente and Camagüey as well as being increasingly accompanied by torture and death squads. The mounting repression during 1957 and early 1958 affected both organisations equally, with frequent reports of PSP militants joining the M-26-7 members among missing, murdered, arrested or tortured.⁵⁹⁶ The ability of the M-26-7 to offer a possible solution to the problem of government organised violence accounts for the spread its *Sección Obrera* network in the east and its increasing attractiveness to ordinary communist workers. It would be a little longer before this growing co-operation at the base would be reflected at leadership level.

⁵⁹⁶ *Carta Semanal* (7th August 1957)

Chapter 6. Two Strikes

In the period from the end of 1956 through to May 1958 there were two important mass strikes, the first, starting in Santiago de Cuba at the beginning of August 1957 was a great success, the second, called for April 9th 1958 was an abject failure. An analysis of these events is crucial in gaining an understanding of the developing tactics of the communists and the July 26th movement as the strikes may be used as a lens through which the issues may be examined. It is also possible to assess the growth of the rebel clandestine labour organisation by examining the extent of the areas affected by each strike. Finally, an examination of the lessons learnt by the rebels from the failure of the April strike shows that these resulted in far reaching organisational and political changes, arguably ensuring the final victory of the revolutionary forces.

When discussing the situation in Cuba in 1957, Zanetti and García contend that:

*The increased level of repression used by the dictatorship, with its continual acts of violence in all aspects of the life of the country, showed that any process or activity, whether conciliatory or not, was useless if it remained within the boundaries of the prevailing theoretical legality. Therefore matters of sectoral interest became subordinated to the decisive problem facing Cuban society: the overthrow of the dictatorship.*⁵⁹⁷

In agreeing with this assessment, this chapter examines the response of the more militant sections of the Cuban working class, many of whose rank and file leaders were becoming increasingly drawn to the 26th July Movement. While Zanetti and Garcia's statement specifically referred to the railway industry, this chapter argues that it was equally true for nearly all industries as the predominant political and social question became the continued existence of the dictatorship. This change in priorities from the economic to the political, combined with the growing realisation that small scale industrial action was becoming impractical in the face of repression, resulted in a growth in workplace sabotage and clandestine aid to the rebels, while the frequency of local or sector based strikes decreased through 1957 and early 1958.

As part of this process, the M-26-7 set up a committee, chaired by Níco Torres, to organise the spread clandestine revolutionary working class organisation from its origins in Guantánamo and Santiago to the rest of the island while, at the same time, building a support network for the rebels in the hills. There has been little previous research on the July 26th Movement's working class underground. It is, of course,

⁵⁹⁷ Zanetti & García, *Caminos para azúcar* (1987) p.372 [my translation]

always difficult to trace the activities of successful clandestine movements; police and newspaper accounts only describe the failures. Nevertheless, there is evidence, in addition to the surviving leaflets and underground newspapers found in the archives and personal collections, there are also the recollections of participants, which can guide an attempt to reconstruct the previously untold history of the spread of the influence of the revolutionary workers' underground.⁵⁹⁸ This leads to a reassessment of role of clandestine organisation in the successful general strike in Oriente province, which was sparked by the death of Frank País, a popular national leader of the M-26-7 urban underground, who was murdered by the police in Santiago in August 1957. The common characterisation of this strike as "spontaneous" will be given a more nuanced explanation that considers the relationship between spontaneity and organisation.

Following this strike, both the PSP and the M-26-7 stepped up their propaganda for a general strike to overthrow the regime. However, the leaders of these two organisations drew very different conclusions from the strike, both using the experience to reinforce an entrenched position. Nevertheless, starting in October 1957, the PSP and rebel army leaderships began talking to each other on a relatively formal basis. However, discussions with the PSP had not advanced greatly by the time the M-26-7 called a general strike on 9th April 1958. This strike, which received almost no working class support in Havana, cost the lives of many of the movement's best underground activists. The subsequent repression was particularly severe, with Batista's chief of police issuing the instruction: "No wounded, No prisoners".⁵⁹⁹ The reasons for this setback are examined, the balance of forces in the opposition camp are discussed and its effect on the future course of the revolutionary process assessed.

In the aftermath, both the PSP and the M-26-7 took stock in May 1958. The changes in the practice which resulted from these internal debates are identified and the lessons drawn by both organisations are outlined. This leads to the conclusion that there

⁵⁹⁸ My interviews with Francisco Monserrat, Alfredo Menendez, Alcibiades Poveda Díaz, Vicente Pérez, Francis Velázquez, María Antúnez. I also attended a meeting of veterans organised by the *Biblioteca Elvia Carpe* in Santiago de Cuba.

I have been given copies of interviews conducted by other scholars and discussed these interviews with them: Luis Figueras's and Delio Orozco's interviews with Níco Torres, Jana Lipman's interview with the co-ordinator of the M-26-7 group in the US base at Guantánamo and Gary Tennant's interview with Octavio Louit.

I have used the published recollections of Miguel Yaro, Pedro Santalla and Ramón Alvarez from *Bohemia* (August 12th 1977)

I have also drawn upon the 20 interviews conducted by Ismael Alonso Coma for his 1981 dissertation Full details in the bibliography.

⁵⁹⁹ Cabrera, *Sagua la Grande escribió su nombre en la historia*, (1959) pp.36-39&122-3

was a convergence in the tactics which both organisations advocated for the overthrow of the dictatorship. The PSP accepted the need for armed opposition to the dictatorship and the M-26-7 took a more open approach to working class organisation. This paved the way for practical joint activity and a new phase in the revolutionary process which marked another turning point in the history of the Cuban insurrection.

A Clandestine Network

Frank País, national leader of the July 26th urban underground, was one of the first amongst the organisation's leadership to see the potential importance of a revolutionary labour movement. He was killed before he could implement his ideas, but the seeds he planted flourished as the networks of militants he encouraged spread from their origins in Guantánamo.

Frank País was arrested in March 1957 as part of the government crack-down following the November 30th assault on Santiago and an attack on the Presidential Palace by the *Directorio Revolucionario* on March 13th . Along with over 100 other M-26-7 defendants, he was released in May, when Judge Manuel Urretia defied pressure from the government and ruled that they were exercising their constitutional right to rebel in the face of tyranny. Upon his release, País immediately set about reorganising the M-26-7 underground movement. As part of this process, he decided that much greater attention was to be paid to recruiting and organising workers. As a result of the success of the strike in Guantánamo in support of the *Granma* landing, Níco Torres, now a wanted man, was made coordinator of a committee charged with rolling out the workplace cell structure and spreading the Guantánamo example nationwide. He spent the next year criss-crossing the island with this objective. However, while Frank País was certainly in the forefront of those in the movement who saw the importance of labour support for the revolution, he still had an incomplete understanding of the need to organise workers around their specific class based interests.

Of the senior figures in the organisation with a labour movement background, other than those from Guantánamo, José Maria de la Aguilera had only led a single strike in a white collar industry, while David Salvador's experience was limited to local activity in *central Stewart*. Conrado Béquer was still leading a double life, attempting to maintain a precarious legality and Julian Alemán was deeply involved in the ongoing troubles of the Matanzas textile industry and did not yet have effective lines of

communication with Santiago. From the beginning, the 26th July Movement had a perspective of organising workers, but their role had been seen principally as providing financial and logistical support for the rebels in the mountains, as well as engaging in sabotage. The success of the Guantánamo strikes in early December 1956 had impressed Frank País enormously with their power and potential, but he seems not to have realised the years of previous work that had been necessary to create the solid foundations that his M-26-7 *compañeros* in that city had been able to draw upon.⁶⁰⁰

The PSP was continually urging the importance of "immediate demands" in the process of organising workers to resist the dictatorship, but the M-26-7 leadership would not come to realise this until later, after they had suffered a severe setback in the April of the following year. Thus the M-26-7 propaganda aimed at the working class at this stage of the movement's development was extremely general, concentrating on appeals to patriotism and rejection of corruption. There was some mention of the defence of wages and conditions, demands for trade union democracy and vague promises of social justice, but the lack of familiarity with the working class political milieu is clearly evident in their surviving leaflets and newspapers.⁶⁰¹

Nevertheless, when Frank País was released from prison, he wrote a report calling for serious attempts to be made to recruit workers saying that the movement had forgotten the importance of the workers who, if well organised and led, could overthrow the regime. He urged the creation of a disciplined and educated leadership which could lead small scale general strikes to gain experience, in the way that had already been done in Guantánamo, where he described efforts made to organise the workers as formidable and which had shown in practice what could be done.⁶⁰² However, according to the memoirs of Armando Hart, one of the leaders of the M-26-7 in Santiago, during these early months of 1957, Frank País's main priorities were to support and supply the rebel guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra and to win over the *Conjunto de Instituciones Cívicas* (Civic Institutions) to supporting an armed insurrection.⁶⁰³ This organisation, led by the President of the Cuban Medical Association, was a loose association of nearly 200 professional and religious organisations ranging from the Freemasons to the Catholic Teachers' League and the Havana Bar Association. It had come to represent the

⁶⁰⁰ Hart, *Aldabonazo, en la clandestinidad revolucionaria cubana, 1952-58* (2004) p.163
Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution*, (2002) pp.12-13

⁶⁰¹ *Revolución* (February 1957) p.1

⁶⁰² Poveda Díaz, *Propaganda y revolución en Santiago de Cuba* (2003)

⁶⁰³ Hart, *Aldabonazo* (2004) pp.91-126

more liberal elements of the Cuban middle class who were becoming increasingly alienated from the regime as the violence worsened and the economy deteriorated.⁶⁰⁴ As part of the process of attracting support from the *Instituciones Cívicas*, a meeting of the *26 de Julio* leadership in the Sierra Maestra in February 1957 decided to set up the *Movimiento de Resistencia Cívica* (MRC). This organisation, while being firmly controlled by M-26-7 members, was nominally independent and acted as a bridge between the rebels and the Civic Institutions.⁶⁰⁵ It is clear from the memoirs of participants such as Armando Hart that the MRC received a much higher priority than did building the *Sección Obrera*.⁶⁰⁶ The Guantánamo militants, having received the blessing of the national leadership, would be given a free hand in building their organisation and spreading the ideas of *sindicalismo beligerante*.



Figure 28: Ramón Alvarez in 1977 from *Bohemia* (August 12th 1977)

To this end, Frank País asked Níco Torres to write a report describing their organisation in Guantánamo. Frank País gave this report to Armando Hart, who in turn sought the advice of friends in the PSP and other Santiago trade unionists with whom he was in contact, such as a Bacardí delivery driver, Ramón Alvarez (Figure 28). This process led to Torres being appointed as head of a national committee charged with organising the movement's work in the labour movement. The committee consisted of Torres, a sugar worker called Asterio Hernández, a telephone engineer, José de la Nuez, and a bank worker,

Jorge Gómez. It was in pursuit of this task that Níco Torres began to tour the country in order to generalise the experience from Guantánamo, while Octavio Luit and Ramón Alvarez moved to become provincial workers' organisers for Las Villas and the central region of the island. It is hard to trace the progress of this work as its secret nature precluded the keeping of records and its success required that the activities of the group did not come to the attention of the authorities. Nevertheless, we can piece together the general lines of the organising drive from later interviews.

For example, we know from the investigations of Delio Orozco, City Historian of Manzanillo, that Torres and Gomez were in the town of Manzanillo in May 1957.

⁶⁰⁴ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.25-28

⁶⁰⁵ Serra, *El Movimiento de Resistencia Cívica* (2007) p.231

⁶⁰⁶ Hart, *Aldabonazo* (2004) pp.91-126

Gomez knew another bank worker, Nardi Iglesias, who had already started building four person cells in his own industry. From this base, the Manzanillo *Sección Obrera* grew and formed cells in the unions representing electrical workers, transport, telephones, pharmaceuticals, bakers, shop workers, shoemakers and coffee roasters. The Manzanillo electrical workers specialised in sabotage, teaching workers in other trades the use of explosives, while the bus drivers of the "El Paraíso" company brought propaganda material from Santiago. Given the proximity to the rebels in the Sierra, raising money and supplies for the rebels was of considerable importance and the Manzanillo *Sección Obrera* sold bonds known as *bonos*, which served as propaganda fliers as well as fund raisers (see Figure 29).⁶⁰⁷

Torres and his committee were not the only M-26-7 activists organising amongst the working class. In Matanzas, recruiting out of the disputes in their industry, the textile workers became the backbone of their regional *Sección Obrera*. The struggles of the textile workers from 1952 onwards, the sacrifice of the Cuban textile industry to the interests of the sugar oligarchy in the 1954 commercial treaty with Japan and the anti-union attitude of the Hedges family, American owners of two factories, *la Rayonera* and *Textilera de Ariguanabo*, all served to increase nationalist sentiment and

provided fertile grounds for the M-26-7 to recruit members. The local offices of the textile workers' union became the organising centre for the 26th July movement in the province, which also adopted an approach, similar to the Guantánamo militants described above, combining sabotage and strike action.⁶⁰⁸



Figure 29: A "bono" (representing the donation of a day's pay) from the National Archive, Havana

There is no surviving record of anyone from Guantánamo visiting Matanzas and it seems likely that textile workers of the province independently developed similar tactics to meet a similar problem. They were coordinated by Julián Alemán, regional secretary of the *Federación Nacional de Trabajadores*

⁶⁰⁷ Orozco, *Interview with Níco Torres* (1990)
 Orozco, *Manzanillo en los 50* (n/d) pp.63-68
 Orozco, *Manzanillo: El Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio* (1989) pp.67-70
 Orozco, *Interview with Delio Orozco* (2009)
⁶⁰⁸ García Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution* (1998) pp.42-50

Textiles (FNTT). Julián Alemán was also national vice-general secretary of the union, but had managed to conceal his links with the M-26-7 and, along with Conrad Bequer and Conrado Rodriguez, was one of only three senior trade union officials to break with Mujal and join the rebels. He was succeeded in his role as co-ordinator of action in Matanzas by Joaquín Torres, who worked in *La Rayona*, when he was forced to leave the area to escape the attention of the police after helping to organise a strike at the end of July 1957 following the murder of Frank País in Santiago.⁶⁰⁹

A "Spontaneous" Strike?

In the summer of 1957, Frank País, now M-26-7 National Co-ordinator of Action, was based in Santiago from where he was working both to promote the movement's clandestine operations and to organise support for the guerrillas in the nearby Sierra Maestra mountains. His murder at the end of July 1957 by a local police chief provoked a general strike in Oriente, which was probably the biggest public demonstration of opposition during the entire Batista dictatorship. These events are generally paid scant attention in the literature, with even the normally highly detailed Ramón Bonachea only according the matter three lines before turning to a long discussion of the effect the death of Frank País had on the internal politics of the M-26-7.⁶¹⁰ Only Julia Sweig deals with it in any detail.⁶¹¹ Sweig's book is an important contribution to the understanding of the underground organisation of the M-26-7, particularly as it is based upon access to the normally secret archives of the Cuban Council of State, to which she was given rare access. However, detailed as her account is, the fact that it is based on the private papers of the leadership of the M-26-7 means that she is mainly concerned with the decisions and actions of that leadership and pays less attention to the organisation necessary to carry out those decisions. This section is written with the intention of using other primary sources to show how the strike was organised in practice.

Wherever the August 57 strike is mentioned in the literature, it is characterised as "spontaneous" and herein may lie the explanation for its neglect, as spontaneity is confused with lack of organisation and political direction. However, this betrays a failure to understand that a far greater level of organisation is required to produce a "spontaneous" strike, than one formally called by the bureaucracy. Statements by militants involved in the strike paint a more complex picture and lend weight to Daniel

⁶⁰⁹ Machado, *El movimiento obrero henequenero* (2011) n.pag.

⁶¹⁰ Bonachea & San Martín, *Cuban insurrection*, (1974) p.146

⁶¹¹ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.46-9

Guérin's assertion that spontaneity and organisation are always intertwined. As he argues, "There is always someone pushing for spontaneity".⁶¹² Therefore, it is probably fair to say that, while the demonstrations and strikes at the time of Frank País's murder and funeral were spontaneous in the sense that no organisation had planned them in advance, the speed with which the strikes spread suggest a high level of clandestine organisation which was able to react quickly and seize an opportunity without requiring orders to do so.

Frank País was caught in a police round-up on 30th July. He was identified by a police informer and shot dead on the spot by Colonel José Maria Salas Cañizares.⁶¹³ This was part of a reign of terror that the colonel had imposed on the city of Santiago de Cuba in the period following the events of 30th November 1957. Frank País's funeral was the occasion for a massive show of opposition, not just to his murder, but in protest at the general level of brutality being visited on the city.⁶¹⁴ Miguel Angel Yero (Figure 30), an activist in the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, describes how he and his comrades went to the funeral with the idea of initiating some action, if at all possible. Seeing a large turnout, combined with the fact that very many Santiagueros shared their anger, they



Figure 30: Miguel Angel Yero in 1977, from *Bohemia* (August 12th 1977)

started to shout for a strike. The call was taken up and the 60,000 people at the funeral marched through the town, calling workers out of their factories, offices and shops until the town was paralysed in a strike that lasted 5 days. Contemporary photographs and accounts of the funeral confirm the prominent part played by women in the demonstrations following the funeral (Figure 31).⁶¹⁵ The July 26th movement had recently been working to organise the shop-workers in Santiago and these workers, predominantly women, played an important role in forcing their employers to close the city's commercial enterprises as well as picketing out other groups.⁶¹⁶ Many of

⁶¹² Guérin, *Rosa Luxembourg et la Spontanéité Révolutionnaire* (1971) p.13

⁶¹³ Alvarez, *Principio y fin del mito fidelista* (2008) p.236-241

⁶¹⁴ Velázquez Fuentes, *Interview with Francis Velázquez Fuentes - Rebel Army veteran* (2009)

⁶¹⁵ Ramos Estives, *Apoyo de la mujer santiaugera a la lucha contra la tiranía de Batista* (1984) p.25
Miranda, *Trazos para el perfil de un combatiente* (1983) p.294 [Figure 31 is a rare photo of the funeral, of which this is the only copy I have been able to find. The more common photo of the funeral, as shown on p.297 of Miranda's book and many other places, including the Museum of the Revolution, is taken a few minutes later when the women leading the procession have passed from view.]

⁶¹⁶ Torres-Hernandez, *Huelga de Agosto* (1977) p.5

Velázquez Fuentes, *Interview with Francis Velázquez* (2009)

these women attempted to present a letter to the US ambassador, Earl Smith and were attacked by the police using fire hoses. This shocked the newly appointed ambassador whose mission thereby did not start well.⁶¹⁷ The vehemence of the popular reaction startled the police and army who, after a few skirmishes, retreated to their barracks where they were besieged for the rest of the day.

The strike spread quickly in Oriente, *Carta Semanal* reporting complete shut-downs of Palma Soriano, Contramaestre, Bayamo, Manzanillo, Guantánamo,



Figure 31: The funeral of Frank País from Miranda, *Trazos para el perfil de un combatiente* (1983) p.294

Campechuela and Jiguaní.⁶¹⁸ In Manzanillo, the situation was considerably aggravated when two soldiers opened fire on a group of passers-by who were jeering at them and, in the process, killed two little boys, one aged five and the other aged eight, the Cordové brothers. The strike in Manzanillo lasted several days.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁷ *New York Times* (August 1st 1957) p.8

⁶¹⁸ *Carta Semanal* (14th August 1957)

⁶¹⁹ Rodríguez Ramirez & Ramos Cabrales, *El Movimiento Revolucionario en Manzanillo* (1988) pp.72-4
Montserrat Iser, *Luchas obreras en Manzanillo* (2009) n.pag.

An M-26-7 militant from Guantánamo, Demetrio Monseny Villa was in Santiago as the strike started and carried news of the events back home. The leadership of the M-26-7 in Guantánamo had been taken by another ex-Trotskyist, Gustavo Fraga, who worked on the US naval base. A strike committee was formed and, starting with the railways, the town and surrounding country went on strike the following morning, August 1st. Frank País was well known and respected in the area and the strike was completely solid; the railway, the electrical plant, the aerodrome, the banks and buses, along with most shops and businesses shutting down. To accompany this industrial action, strikers bombed some bridges and power lines as well as taking part in armed skirmishes with the police and rural guard. Here as well, the brutal behaviour of the forces of order helped spread the strike as the army broke open shops that were shut and threw their merchandise into the street, thereby giving a propaganda coup to the rebels, who ensured that the soldiers were the only ones engaged in looting.

Fraga, as well as being in overall charge of the 26th July intervention in the strike in Guantánamo, was also running the explosives "laboratory" in a garage in the city. On the 4th August, there was an explosion which killed Fraga and several other members of the movement. The explosion in the bomb factory was a blow to the movement, as they not only lost some important militants, but also a considerable stock of weapons. However, it served to prolong the strike and deepen bitterness against the regime as the first act of the police on arrival at the scene was to shoot dead two neighbours who were not involved with the M-26-7, but merely trying to put out the flames and stop the fire spreading to the rest of the neighbourhood. Such acts of random brutality against uninvolved bystanders, similar to the the killing of the Cordové boys in Manzanillo, are a common feature of the times which did much to increase opposition to the regime. But with Guantánamo the only city remaining on strike by the 9th August, the national leadership of the M-26-7 ordered a return to work, fearing the army was planning to make an example of the town.⁶²⁰

Octavio Louit (Figure 32), now a clandestine organiser for the 26th July Movement, was in Santiago for consultations with the national leadership when Frank País was killed. He returned to Camagüey to spread the strike, while Torres continued on to Havana to see what could be done in the capital. In Camagüey, there was a

⁶²⁰ Sección de historia, *Guantánamo, apuntes para una cronología histórica* (n/d) p.41
Comisión Nacional de Historia, *Provincia Guantánamo* (1980) pp.8-9
Coma, *El Movimiento 26 de Julio en Guantánamo* (1981) pp.58-61
García Faure & Canseco Aparicio, *Algunas Manifestaciones Políticas en Guantánamo* (2009) pp.73-5

positive response from the rail workers, the intercity bus drivers, the banks and the airport. However, it did not prove possible to produce a similar result in Las Villas, where the army had rounded up as many militants as they could and succeeded in intimidating most of the workforce, with bus and truck drivers being forced to return to work at gunpoint. There were considerably more stoppages in Pinar del Rio province, most notably the town of Artemesia, a surprising result as it was not an area with much history of industrial militancy.⁶²¹



Figure 32: Octavio Louit from *Revolución* (1959)

Both sides saw Havana as key to the situation and the government concentrated its efforts here. The action did not spread to Havana immediately and the Havana strike committee called for the action to start on August 5th. There was little response although there was some action from bus drivers and construction workers, along with stoppages in the Coca-cola factory and by the tobacco workers in Partagas and H. Upmann. Little or nothing occurred in the suburbs or the rest of Havana province. The Matanzas textile industry saw some partial strike action and token stoppages, but Julián Alemán's base in "*la Jarcia*" was the only factory where the workers walked out completely.⁶²² Once the strike had failed to get off the ground in Havana, it quickly petered out in the East.⁶²³

Although it is difficult to trace the organisation of a clandestine movement, given that its very success depends upon the utmost secrecy, reliable documents do exist, it is just that they have been overlooked or ignored. This strike gives us a snapshot of the development of the workers' underground in the summer of 1957. There was clearly an established organisation in most of Oriente province, given the speed with which the strike spread to other towns such as Bayamo. The response from Camagüey suggests a well rooted network there as well. It is probably significant that Octavio Louit, speaking 20 years later, used the expression "*núcleos obreros combativos*" (combative workers' cells) for the organisation in Ciega de Avila, Jatibonico, Florida and other parts of the central zone, while talking of "*compañeros muy valerosos*" (very brave comrades) in Las Villas,

⁶²¹ Torres Hernández, *La Huelga de agosto* (1977) p.6

⁶²² IHC 24/3.12/1:2.3/1-56 *Informes del Jefe del BRAC sobre actividades subversivas*. (1st - 9th September 1957) cited in Machado, *El movimiento obrero henequenero* (2011) n.pag

⁶²³ Torres Hernández, *Huelga de Agosto* (1977) pp.5-7

Carta Semanal (14th August 1957)

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 107 (Aug. 7, 1957) *Revolutionary opposition attempts general strike*; Frank Pais

thereby implying a real network in the former case, but more isolated individuals in the second.⁶²⁴ Of course, we need to remember that this strike happened in the middle of the *tiempo muerto* when there would not have been much activity in the sugar industry to stop. This is significant because we know that the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera* in Las Villas was based on the sugar workers around Conrado Béquer. Béquer was still operating legally at this stage and may not have prioritised building the underground network outside his traditional base. It may also be assumed that the Las Villas *Sección Obrera* was not yet organised to reflect the Guantánamo experience with its principles of *sindicalismo beligerante*, but was concentrating on support and supply for the guerrillas. Finally, Béquer had very sour relations with the communist party, as witnessed by the mutual public recriminations and accusations discussed in chapter four.⁶²⁵

Generally speaking, areas where the August strike was most effective were those where there was established cooperation between the M-26-7 and the PSP, a point made indirectly by *Carta Semanal* in its analysis which was printed in the following weeks. The communist newspaper blames the failure to convince the majority of the Havana workers to join the strike on government repression and Mujal's "treason", but spends most time expressing the opinion that these could have been overcome had there been unity in the opposition. Indeed it goes further and, without presenting any evidence, accuses the "bourgeois opposition" of undermining the strike and being more interested in not offending the US ambassador. The M-26-7 is specifically named as one of the bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties against whom this accusation is levelled. While this is obviously unfair as, after all, it was the M-26-7 who called the strike in Havana for August 5th, what is certainly true is that the July 26th organisation in Havana did not involve the PSP in the planning of the strike call. There had been some contact between the M-26-7 and the communists through the *Juventud Socialista*, but Luis Fajado, the PSP contact person, was not present at the meeting in the Church of San Francisco where the decision to launch the strike on the 5th was taken and it probably took the communists by surprise.⁶²⁶ Therefore, in those areas of the capital's labour force, such as the docks, where the M-26-7 appears to have had little influence in the summer of 1957, by the time word had spread of the strike call, its failure would already have been apparent. The fact that some areas of communist influence, mainly bus crews and

⁶²⁴ Torres-Hernandez, *Huelga de Agosto* (1977) p.7

⁶²⁵ IHC 1/8:13/A1/1.1/27 CNDDO, "*Carta Abierta*" (12th October 1956) *Carta Semanal* (January 18th, 25th 1956 & special issue February 1956)

⁶²⁶ Torres-Hernandez, *Huelga de Agosto* (1977) pp.5-6

tobacco workers, took part in the action testifies to the PSP's willingness to participate, while the disciplinary action taken against 200 bus drivers for taking part in the strike can only have increased the communists' sense of bitterness.⁶²⁷

The question of disciplinary reprisals brings us back to the strong support for the strike in Pinar del Rio. In the Minas de Matahambre, attempts were made to arrest some workers after the strike, but the rest of the miners refused to start work until their colleagues were released. The cry of "*¡o trabaja todos, o no trabajo ninguno!*" (Either all of us work or none of us!) was successful and the detainees were released.⁶²⁸ Little is currently known about revolutionary workers' organisation in Pinar del Rio, but these incidents suggest that the area would repay further study.

Finally, we must consider the lack of response from Matanzas, despite its militant tradition and strong workers' section of the 26th July Movement amongst the textile workers. Neither of the detailed surveys of the revolutionary period conducted by Gladys García Pérez and Clara Chávez Alvarez give any indication of strike action in Matanzas in August 1957, but do not offer any reason for the failure of the region to support the strike. Any explanation must be conjecture but, the previously mentioned lack of contact between the Matanzas militants and their comrades in the East may have meant that, by the time word had spread of the actions in Oriente, the strike had already passed its peak.

The search for explanations for the lack of success in Havana or Matanzas should not result in an underestimation of the speed with which the strike spread in Oriente, Camagüey and Pinar del Rio; an impressive achievement in the circumstances. A general strike may start more or less spontaneously in a single town, but to spread it across three provinces in a matter of days demonstrates a significant level of organisation and the foregoing description of the spread of the strike paints a useful snapshot of the state of oppositional working class organisation in August 1957.

April 9th 1958

The success, in Oriente, of the strike wave in protest at Frank País's murder quite eclipsed the subsequent failure to spread the action further west. This would encourage the leadership of the M-26-7 to call a general strike starting on April 9th 1958, which they envisaged as the final blow required to overthrow the dictatorship. However, it was

⁶²⁷ *Carta Semanal* (21st August 1957)

⁶²⁸ *Carta Semanal* (28st August 1957)

a complete disaster, begging the questions: How can we explain the success of the strike in some areas and the lack of response in others? What is its significance and what lessons were drawn from it by the opposition?

The leaderships of both the PSP and the M-26-7 were extremely impressed by the impact of the August 1957 strike, but drew very different conclusions, both using the experience to reinforce an entrenched position. The M-26-7 leadership concluded that one more push was all that was required for victory, without fully realising the amount of work that still remained to be done in terms of building the networks, particularly in Havana, which was necessary to call a successful nationwide general strike. The PSP, on the other hand, having seen the widespread support of their proposals for a 20% wage claim, as well as the strikes against repression, felt that they had cause to believe that their approach, *la lucha de masas*, was bearing fruit. They concluded that the strike had weakened the government and had proved that strike action alone was the sufficient and only way to bring down the government.⁶²⁹ Moreover, the M-26-7 had not learned the lesson of the sugar strike, which had shown the importance of the economic struggles in radicalising workers, and thus ignored the PSP's insistence on the importance of raising "immediate demands"⁶³⁰. But with both organisations committed to a general strike, albeit with a completely different understanding of the term, there was some basis for the discussions between Fidel Castro and the veteran communist sugar workers' leader, Ursinio Rojas, which took place in the Sierra Maestra in October 1957.⁶³¹

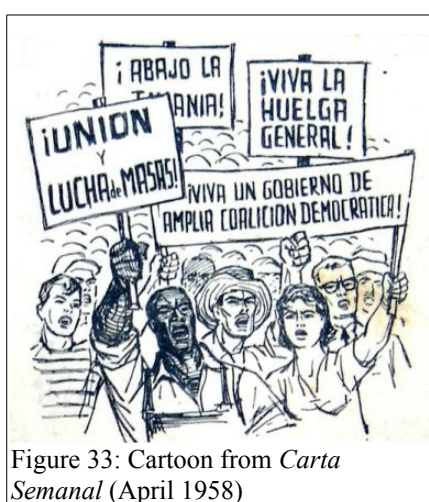


Figure 33: Cartoon from *Carta Semanal* (April 1958)

Following this meeting, an attempt was made to form a united workers front. There were several meetings in Havana, with the CNDDO represented by Carlos Rodriguez Cariaga, Miguel Quintero and occasionally Ursinio Rojas, while the M-26-7 was represented by Níco Torres, Octavio Louit and Conrado Béquer. However, these meetings failed to reach agreement because, according to Torres, the PSP were opposed to the armed struggle.⁶³² Nevertheless, these discussions produced a softening

⁶²⁹ *Carta Semanal* (21st August 1957) p.3

⁶³⁰ Rodriguez, *José Antonio Echeverría y la clase obrera* (1967) p.55; *Carta Semanal* (28th August 1957) p.1

⁶³¹ Anderson, *Che Guevara* (1997) p.297

⁶³² Orozco, *Interview with Níco Torres* (1990)

of the party's attitude to the guerrillas which, while it still extolled *la lucha de masas* (Figure 33) and condemned urban terrorism, pledged its support to the rebels in the Sierra Maestra in March 1958, with the reservation that armed action must support mass action rather than the other way round.⁶³³ It may also be significant that *Carta Semanal* started to take a much less hostile line when speaking of Conrado Béquer, having become aware that he was a member of the M-26-7.⁶³⁴ Furthermore, the PSP national committee decided, in February, to send one of its members, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, to the Sierra for face to face discussions, but before this could be arranged, the 26th July Movement unilaterally called a general strike.⁶³⁵

Bonachea graphically describes how, by the spring of 1958, the guerrillas in the Sierra Maestra had survived for over a year and had grown into an efficient disciplined fighting force. With the help of the urban underground, they had established control over their area, carried out many successful attacks on government forces and built up a considerable measure of support amongst the local *campesinos*.⁶³⁶ Their continued existence helped maintain the atmosphere of crisis and gave hope and inspiration to the regime's opponents, while the army's obvious inability to destroy them militarily undermined Batista's waning credibility. Add to this the fact that, by the beginning of March 1958, a student strike had managed to close most of the country's educational system, and a general strike call appeared to be the logical next step.⁶³⁷ Faustino Pérez, who was in overall charge of the operation, said, in a later interview, that the success of the August 1957 strike convinced him that conditions existed for the final uprising which would overthrow the regime and that this led to an unrealistic view of the balance of forces.⁶³⁸ In a letter to Fidel Castro dated April 2nd 1958, Pérez states that "all sectors look favourably on the strike and are ready to support".⁶³⁹ Having previously seen that it was possible to organise a general strike in the east, all sides saw the success or failure of the strike in Havana as key to the situation. However, while the organisation of the FON had continued to grow and establish itself outside the capital, it had only made very limited inroads in Havana itself. This was in part, as Julia Sweig's researches show, because anti-communist elements in the Havana M-26-7 underground were unhappy

⁶³³ "Porque nuestro partido apoya a la Sierra Maestra", *Carta Semanal* (12th March 1958)

⁶³⁴ *Carta Semanal* (22th January 1958)

⁶³⁵ Karol, *Guerrillas in power* (1970) p.153

⁶³⁶ Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection* (1974) p.173

⁶³⁷ "Estudiantes" *Bohemia* (16th March 1958)

⁶³⁸ Pérez, *La sierra, el llano* (1969) p.73

⁶³⁹ Pérez, *Letter to Fidel Castro* (2nd April 1958) Suárez collection [copy in author's possession]

with Castro's discussions with the PSP and, as a result, refused to organise joint strike committees in the capital with communists for sectarian reasons. It should be stressed that at this point the FON was far from being a unified organisation and its practice varied enormously from region to region, depending on the politics and previous experience of its leaders in any locality. In particular, there was an East-West split with the concept of *sindicalismo beligerante* being more dominant in the East, while in the West, the role of the workers was rather seen as supporting the militias and raising money. This would affect the course of the April strike as the importance of winning the capital meant that it was to be run from Havana.

Faustino Pérez wrote to Fidel Castro at the beginning of April expressing unhappiness at the manifesto which Castro had issued on 26th March. This manifesto said that "the leadership of the FON will co-ordinate their efforts with the workers' sections of all political and revolutionary organisations"; a policy that was not popular with the Havana M-26-7 leadership.⁶⁴⁰ Nevertheless, in some of the industrial suburbs of Havana, San Miguel del Padrón, Guanabacoa, Regla, Bejucal, San Jose de las Lajas and Luyanó, joint committees had been established, but this was without the consent, perhaps without even the knowledge, of the Havana leadership of the 26th July Movement.

The M-26-7, prior to April 1958, had an essentially military view of the general strike and workers were expected to place the "National Interest" above their perceived class interests.⁶⁴¹ This caused the M-26-7 to give responsibility for the strike organisation to the *Movimiento de Resistencia Cívica* in Havana; an organisation which had neither the experience nor the networks capable of fulfilling their role. The national strike committee, which consisted of Faustino Pérez, Marcelo Salado, Manolo Rey, David Salvador and Marcelo Fernández, had little experience or understanding of labour militancy.⁶⁴² Their conception of a general strike relied much more heavily on sabotage and the armed action of militia fighters than on the conscious self activity of rank and file workers, more of an armed popular insurrection than a traditional workers' strike. This was not the opinion of everyone in the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, as the bank worker

⁶⁴⁰ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.126-131
Suaréz Collection "Letter from Faustino Pérez to Fidel Castro" (April 2nd 1958) [copy in author's possession, my translation]

"El 9 de Abril de 1958" *Bohemia* (19th April 1959) p.111-112

⁶⁴¹ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.44-5

⁶⁴² "El 9 de Abril de 1958" *Bohemia* (19th April 1959) p.59

José María de la Aguilera made clear in an interview with an Argentine journalist later in 1958.⁶⁴³

However, in the spring of that year, such voices as Aguilera were in a minority in Havana. From the end of 1957, with Níco Torres incapacitated by illness, the FON itself had been under the leadership of David Salvador, a sugar worker from Ciego de Avila. He was an ex-communist and a founder member of the 26th July Movement. Despite his occupational background, his involvement had been mainly in the general political arena and his experience of the working class movement was limited. This inexperience prevented his appreciating the inadequacy of the organisation in Havana, while the hangover from his previous relationship with the PSP meant that he had little inclination to work with them.⁶⁴⁴

Reading the communist party's literature of the time it is obvious that they thought the strike would start on Mayday.⁶⁴⁵ Communists in the industrial suburbs of Havana started agitating for a general strike from the beginning of March. Thus, for example on 14th March, the *Juventud Socialista* (JS) in San Miguel del Padrón organised a march through the area shouting "*¡Huelga General!* (General Strike!)" and "*¡Abajo Batista!*" (Down with Batista!) in which they managed to involve some of the youth section of the July 26th movement.⁶⁴⁶ This agitation in support of a general strike was combined with a series of open letters and appeals calling for the unity of the FON with the CNDDO.⁶⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the secrecy about the start of the strike obviously irritated the PSP who accused the M-26-7 of sectarianism on several occasions, even while calling for unity.

Despite the insistence of many local FON organisers that they needed 72 hours notice to activate their networks, the strike organisers decided to keep the date of the proposed action secret, only telling M-26-7 militants in Havana on the morning of the 9th April itself.⁶⁴⁸ If the date was secret, the fact that a strike was planned was not, Fidel Castro having announced a forthcoming revolutionary general strike when he made his declaration of "Total War" on 12th March. Thus forewarned, the government had

⁶⁴³ Masetti, *Los que luchan y los que lloran* (1969) pp.169-172

⁶⁴⁴ This estimation of David Salvador is based on the letter from Robert Alexander to Jay Lovestone (January 19th 1959) cited in Alexander, *A History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002) pp206-7&213 as well as the opinion of the British Embassy as stated in FO 371/139397 - AK1012/1 (July 31st 1959) *Leading personalities in Cuba*

⁶⁴⁵ eg. IHC 1/8:13A1/7.1/1, CDDO de Marianao, "*Viva el 1º de Mayo*" (April 1958)

⁶⁴⁶ *Carta Semanal* (26th March 1958)

⁶⁴⁷ *Carta Semanal* (19th March 1958)

CNDDO al FON (13th March 1958) Suárez collection [copy in author's possession]

⁶⁴⁸ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.130-134

suspended the constitution and placed the army and police on a war footing. The CTC bureaucracy had stepped up its anti-Castro propaganda, accusing the M-26-7 of stabbing the working class in the back, while issuing threats that any workers supporting the strike would be dismissed and that the unions would not support them. To this end, the CTC bureaucracy drew up lists of suspected militants for the police and the employers.⁶⁴⁹

Thus, while the authorities were prepared, most workers were taken completely by surprise when the strike call came at 11am on the 9th April and were thereby denied that feeling of ownership that is so essential to the success of a strike. The police and army, supported by a pro-government militia, the Tigers, rampaged through the streets of Havana, discharging their weapons at random. The poorly armed M-26-7 militia were unable to wrest control, indeed most were not even in a position to defend themselves. In these circumstances, most workers found it impossible to leave their workplaces and the strike failed.

In the *Archivo Nacional* in Havana, there is a typewritten account of the April 9th strike, written by Roger Venegas Calabuch, coordinator of the M-26-7 grouping in the port of Havana. He paints a graphic image of chaotic organisation; the first he hears of the strike is at half past ten on the morning of April 9th, when he is ordered by the clandestine M-26-7 leadership in Havana to "strike the port of Havana". He was astonished and replied that it was impossible to pull out 10,000 workers in thirty minutes. He says they had no weapons, while armed police were everywhere.⁶⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the leaflets arguing for the strike did not arrive until 2 o'clock in the afternoon.⁶⁵¹ In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the strike failed. The government television station was able to dismiss the affair as "isolated groups of criminal elements under the leadership of the communist party", despite the fact that, on the morning of the 9th April, PSP members had been as much at a loss as everyone else.⁶⁵² There is, however, not the slightest evidence for Bonachea's unsubstantiated allegations that the PSP collaborated with the police on the day.⁶⁵³

⁶⁴⁹ "El 9 de Abril de 1958" *Bohemia* (19th April 1959) pp.58-61&111-2

⁶⁵⁰ Archivo Nacional de Cuba (ANC) 15-26-1178 ,Venegas Calabuch, *Carta Abierta: En memoria de un nueve de abril* (1959)

⁶⁵¹ ANC 6-180-2794 M-26-7 *Instrucciones al pueblo para el día de la huelga* (April 1958)

⁶⁵² "El 9 de Abril de 1958" *Bohemia* (19th April 1959) pp.58-61&111-2

⁶⁵³ Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection*, (1974) p.221

The CNDDO kept a tactful silence on the disaster, but *Carta Semanal* was vitriolic, attacking the M-26-7 for sectarianism and for sterile commando raids producing the unnecessary deaths of brave young people.⁶⁵⁴ Nevertheless, they admitted that the limited but courageous response showed that the workers saw the necessity of a general strike. *Carta Semanal* also noted the relative greater success in the eastern provinces and condemned divisions in the opposition; the subtext here being that in the east there was a greater tradition of united working class action involving communist workers.⁶⁵⁵ Outside the capital, the response to the strike call was mixed but far from insignificant as Table 6 below indicates.

Guanabacoa	M-26-7 militia succeeded in sealing off the access roads, disarming the police and seizing control of the town, but had to disappear when it became clear that they were alone.
Matanzas province	Many agricultural workers stopped work in rural areas
La Rayonera	Work stopped in the textile factory following sabotage of the water supply
Matanzas and Cardenas	Those workers who walked out in response to a strike call broadcast over the radio, quickly returned to work as news arrived from Havana
Las Villas province	<i>Junta Patriótica de las Villas</i> , which involved all sections of the militant opposition, had been formed earlier in the month
Sagua la Grande	Town seized by the local rebel militia and only retaken following fierce fighting with the loss of 14 militiamen. Aircraft were used to bomb militia positions with much civilian loss of life.
Santa Clara	Complete stoppage of the railway and intercity buses, along with a partial stoppage of commercial activity and some strike activity amongst carpenters and tobacco workers. Some fighting in the streets
Cabaiguán	Strikes of bank, tobacco and telephone workers
Sancti Spiritus	Electrical and telephone workers as well as <i>central Vega</i>
Yaguajay	Complete stoppage
Camagüey city	Strike started in the afternoon of the 9th and continued on the 10th. Railways - operating, workshops. permanent way and offices; Local buses; Banks; Telephones; Electrical plant; Shops; Restaurants and hotels; Taxis; Radio stations; Guarina and Pijuán factories; Catedral meat processing plant. Bus drivers abandon buses to block roads - forced back to work at gunpoint. Police smash windows of closed shops.

⁶⁵⁴ IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/74, CNDDO "*¡Viva el Primero de Mayo!*" (1958); *Carta Semanal* (23rd April 1958) pp.1-4

⁶⁵⁵ *Carta Semanal* (16th April 1958) p.4

Camagüey province	<i>centrales</i> Jaronú, Siboney & Florida Town of Nuevitas shut completely
Oriente Province	The major towns of the region came to a standstill - Santiago, Bayamo, Manzanillo Guantánamo
El Cobre	Guerrillas take and hold the town of El Cobre on the outskirts of Santiago
Other Guerrilla actions	Guerrillas advanced to the outskirts of Manzanillo, Yara, Santa Rita, Baracoa
Santiago	Santiago militias attack Cuartel de Boniato. Miguel Yero and Alvaro Alvarez call strike at 10.45am. Solid for 3 days, 11 dead. Electrical workers take vital machine parts home to prevent strikebreakers.
Manzanillo	Failure of communication meant that the strike did not start till the 11th and was called off later that day following news from Havana and Santiago. However, was solid for its short duration.
Guantánamo	Starts on railways, by 10th <i>ciudad muerta</i> . No press till 15th. Port of Boquerón closed. Guerrillas attack various army and police barracks, including <i>central Jamaica</i> on 12th and <i>central Soledad</i> on the 13th. Army forced to remain in barracks. Return to work after 5 days
<p><i>This table was compiled from the following sources:</i> "El 9 de Abril de 1958" <i>Bohemia</i> (19th April 1959) p.112 Chávez Alvarez, <i>Matanzas de rojo y negro</i> (2007) pp.163-167 <i>Carta Semanal</i> (2nd, 9th, 11th, 12th, 16th, 23rd April 1958) Cabrera, <i>Sagua la Grande escribió su nombre en la historia</i> (1959) pp36-38,122-3 Montserrat Iser, <i>Luchas obreras en Manzanillo</i> (2009) n.pag. Orozco, <i>Manzanillo: El Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio y el apoyo a la Sierra</i> (1989) pp.77-78 Rodríguez Ramirez & Ramos Cabrales, <i>El Movimiento Revolucionario en manzanillo de 1950 a 1959</i> (1988) pp.76-78 Mendoza Bú, <i>El movimiento 26 de julio en el sector ferroviario en Santiago de Cuba</i> (1988) p.57 Andrews, Tomás, <i>La huelga de 9 de abril en Guantánamo</i> (1982) pp.15-34 Rodríguez López & Martínez Rodríguez, <i>La huelga de 9 de abril de 1958 en la ciudad de Camagüey</i> (1984) n.pag. Coya, <i>El movimiento obrero en Santiago de Cuba 1952-1958</i> (1982) p.103</p>	

Jorge Ibarra Cuesta argues that "*the attempts to carry out a general strike in September 1957 and April 1958 were successful only in the towns of the interior but failed in Havana, fundamentally because of differences in living conditions*".⁶⁵⁶ This argument needs to be nuanced. Many workers in Havana had been able to protect their living standards and staffing levels because of the nature of the predominant industries. We have discussed previously the port and tobacco industries, where the workers had avoided defeat. Another important sector in Havana was the tourist industry, to which the construction industry was closely linked, as the major building work in the capital was for new hotels. The tourist industry was still booming despite the growing crisis

⁶⁵⁶ Ibarra Cuesta, *Prologue to Revolution* (1998) pp.126-7

and US Mafia made use of their participation in tourism to launder money from their illegal activities at home. This meant that the economic crisis resulting from the fluctuations in the price of sugar did not affect the tourist industry in the same way, thereby reducing the imperative on their employers to raise productivity by reducing living standards. All of which meant that there were less reasons for some workers in Havana to support a revolutionary solution at this stage.

Guantánamo was again the last town to return to work; the order to resume working was given because the army was now free to concentrate as much force as would be required to make an example of the town. The strike here lasted as long as it did because the newly arrived rebel force in the Sierra Cristal, the *Segundo Frente* (Second Front) commanded by Raúl Castro, was able to engage the forces of repression and thereby provide cover for the strikers. While the guerrillas elsewhere were able to harass government forces, such as in El Cobre, this was as yet the only area in which rebel forces were sufficiently strong to neutralise the army locally; aided by the isolation of the region from the centres of power. The comparative success of the strike in the Guantánamo region would give those who advocated *sindicalismo beligerante* the credibility they needed to spread their approach to the rest of the island.

Picking up the pieces

The failure of the strike in Havana provoked an intense debate within the anti-Batista movement. The personal collection of Reinaldo Suaréz has contributed two documents which reflect this debate. The first is a letter to Fidel Castro, copied to the M-26-7 National Directorate and to the leadership of the FON, signed by various Havana workers' organisers and militia captains. It is written in a critical tone and complains that the strike has played into the enemy's hands. It goes on to say that the July 26th movement had insufficient penetration in the working class to call a general strike and had relied on armed action rather than the conscious will of the workers. However, this strategy was doomed because there were insufficient arms. Other problems outlined are that there was insufficient preparation, that important sectors such as the shop workers did not receive the strike call until too late, that there was a lack of communication between the leadership and local co-ordinators who had to organise the strike at base level and that there was a failure to co-ordinate with other organisations. The letter concludes that the organisation had lost touch with reality and had started to

believe its own propaganda about the balance of forces.⁶⁵⁷ Another letter, this one signed by the provincial leadership in Las Villas, made similar points, but in a much more measured tone, accepting that the failure was the fault of the whole organisation, not any particular leader. This difference may be explained by the fact that the strike in Las Villas had been considerably more successful than the previous attempt in August 1957 and the authors had something to be proud of in a local context. It is worthy of note that the Las Villas letter starts by saying that the analysis it contains is the result of extensive consultation within the regional organisation.⁶⁵⁸ It is safe to assume that there would have been considerable debate within the M-26-7 and that when the national leadership met at the beginning of May, they would have been aware of the tenor of that debate.

The process of picking up the pieces therefore began with a meeting on May 3rd 1958 at Los Altos de Mompié in the Sierra Maestra. From the point of view of working class involvement in the insurrection, two important decisions were taken, one of which was to give future priority to the guerrilla struggle, the other was to reorganise the FON. As part of this latter process, Níco Torres, now recovered from his illness, was restored to the leadership of the FON, while David Salvador was given other responsibilities. Torres had been out of action for the early part of 1958, following an operation for a stomach ulcer and had only returned to activity when the plans for the April strike were well in train.⁶⁵⁹ The relatively greater success of the strike in areas that he had influenced and the particular success in his home town of Guantánamo must have given him the necessary credibility to reorganise the FON and he set about extending his network and methodology from Oriente towards the capital.

The FON showed an immediate change of style with the issue of a manifesto in May 1958 that took responsibility for the fiasco. Nevertheless, it maintained that a general strike was the most efficient way to defend and extend workers rights, as well as "curbing the sinister despotism that is strangling our republic".⁶⁶⁰ The manifesto attacked Mujal and the government in a detailed manner, highlighting the widely unpopular, corrupt practice of compulsory check-off of union subscriptions. It finished with a list of demands that mixed the economic and political in a way that is clearly designed to link the need for revolutionary change with workers' immediate concerns. An example of the new approach can be seen in a surviving FON leaflet calling for a

⁶⁵⁷ Ignarra et al., *Letter to Fidel Castro* (19th April 1958) Suárez collection [copy in author's possession]

⁶⁵⁸ Dirección provincial de Las Villas, *Letter to the Dirección Nacional* (30th April 1958)

⁶⁵⁹ Orozco, *Interview with Níco Torres* (1990)

⁶⁶⁰ IHC 1/8:14/1.1/6, FON, "*Manifiesto del FON*" (1958)

railway strike in Las Villas in protest at the late payment of wages, which relates directly to a matter of immediate concern and contrasts to the general exhortations contained in the FON leaflet calling the April 9th strike.⁶⁶¹ This shows an increasing acceptance of the PSP's view of the importance of immediate demands and would have lent credibility to the other theme of the reorganised FON, the call to unity. This reflected the realignment towards the communists that was emerging with the discussions between Fidel Castro and the PSP delegate Carlos Rafael Rodríguez.

In a much quoted article written in 1964, Che Guevara speaks of Níco Torres being given instructions to work with the PSP in the labour movement and of his reluctant but disciplined agreement to do so.⁶⁶² It is however likely that his reluctant attitude was shared by others in the leadership, who might have been convinced of the need to work with the PSP, but who were not happy with the prospect. The strained relationship between the PSP and the rest of the anti-government opposition demonstrates, in part, the divisive effect of Cold War anti-communist propaganda. The liberal opposition, often rather contemptuously referred to as "*los partidos burgueses*" (bourgeois parties) in PSP literature, did not wish to antagonise the USA by being seen to associate with the communists. Thus, for example, in November 1955, the fact that the PSP had organised a large turnout to support an opposition demonstration was condemned as "Communist sabotage" in the opposition press.⁶⁶³ The PSP wrote endless open letters to the "bourgeois opposition" proposing a united front, although nearly always in terms which invited rejection, but they rarely if ever received a reply.⁶⁶⁴ Of course the PSP's uncritical support of the USSR, in particular its support of the crushing of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, played into the hands of its enemies.⁶⁶⁵ These attitudes affected the relationship between the PSP and the July 26th Movement. Thus, the bad start to relations as a result of the condemnation of the Moncada attack continued and by the middle of 1958, a significant anti-communist faction had grown in the M-26-7, particularly in Havana.

However, it is important to differentiate between, on the one hand, right-wing anti-communism that is opposed to the potential threat that communists pose to property

⁶⁶¹ IHC 1/8:14/1.1/7, FON, "*A los compañeros ferroviarios*" (n/d)
IHC 1/8:14/2.1/1-2, FON, "*Huelga General Revolucionaria*" (1958)

⁶⁶² Thomas, *Cuba*, (1998) pp.1002-7
Guevara, *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* (2001) p.245

⁶⁶³ "Sabotaje Comunista" *Bohemia* (November 27th 1955)

⁶⁶⁴ eg *Carta Semanal* (4th July 1956)

⁶⁶⁵ *Carta Semanal* (30th October 1956)

relations, which is more common amongst the petit-bourgeoisie and the professions with property to lose and, on the other hand, left-wing anti-communism that saw the PSP as too moderate and overly prepared to make compromises, which is more common amongst working class militants. Torres as a sometime trotskyist falls into the latter camp.

The decision to work with the PSP had to be implemented in the aftermath of the failure of the April strike about which, as outlined above, the PSP had been given no details and had not been involved the planning process. The PSP leadership clearly felt considerable irritation at their exclusion from the strike, but this potential animosity seems to have been overcome by the decision of the July 26th Movement to begin serious negotiations. The PSP had been calling for unity for a long time and the approach from the rebels gave them reason to believe that their criticisms had been at least partially accepted. Moreover, the negotiations were given urgency by the ever increasing wave of state sponsored terror, which was widely reported in the party's press. The disappearance and subsequent murder of two of the most prominent and well known communist leaders, Paquito Rosales, ex-mayor of Manzanillo, and José María Pérez, a bus workers' leader who had also been a congressional representative, appears to have shocked the rest of PSP leadership.⁶⁶⁶ Blas Roca, PSP general secretary, tells us that this terror started to convince the party leadership that there was no possibility of a legal solution to the crisis and that there was a need for armed protection before workers would take further action.⁶⁶⁷

Conclusion

The August 1957 strike occurred because of a convergence of the deeply felt anger of a mass of the population in eastern Cuba with the existence of a clandestine organisation capable of capitalising on the situation and spreading the action. The failure of the April 9th strike demonstrates that the "directing will of the centre" is insufficient without mass involvement.

If chaotic organisation and divisions within the opposition are a contributing factor in the failure of the April 1958 strike, they are a not sufficient explanation in themselves. The inability of the rebels to win a military confrontation with the

⁶⁶⁶ *Carta Semanal* (12th March 1958)

⁶⁶⁷ Sims, *Cuban Labor and the Communist Party* (1985) p.55
Cuba Socialista (January 1964) p.22-3

government's armed forces in Havana must be seen as being decisive. Of course, any government's power is always concentrated in the capital and this advantage was enhanced in this case by the fact that the influence of the trade union bureaucracy, upon which Batista depended so heavily, was also strongest in Havana.

Despite the failure of the August and April strikes to reach Havana, they were nevertheless impressive displays of opposition. Their ability to generate such widespread action, combined with the survival and growth of the rebel army in the mountains, made it clear that the M-26-7 was now, irrespective of the defeated strike, the centre of opposition to Batista and other political organisations would have to orientate to them. The PSP therefore had an interest in coming to an understanding with the M-26-7 despite their annoyance at being excluded before the strike. With hindsight, it was probably politically fortunate for the PSP to have been so excluded, as it is unlikely that their involvement in the planning of the strike could have affected the outcome greatly, while their exclusion left them with the moral high ground.

The failure of the strike also convinced a significant group within the July 26th Movement that there would be advantages in working with the PSP, who still had sufficient roots in the labour movement to be of assistance. An analysis of the detail of both strikes certainly indicates that they were most successful in areas where militants of the two organisations worked together. The new leadership of the FON, while having no liking for the leadership of the PSP, were prepared to take a pragmatic approach and would begin serious negotiations over the summer of 1958. As we have seen from examining their agitational material, there was much common ground between the egalitarian nationalist politics of the M-26-7 and the communist notion of an "amplia coalición democrática" (broad democratic alliance), with both requiring a cross class alliance fighting for democracy and national independence. The differences between the two organisations were on the tactical rather than the strategic level and circumstances were pushing both organisations to adopting a more accommodating attitude. Thus, the failure of the strike on April 9th caused both the M-26-7 and the PSP to change their approach and we see the start of a process of tactical convergence between the PSP and the M-26-7, although the organisational convergence would be slower.

The historiography of the Cuban revolution concentrates, in relation to the April 9th events, on apportioning blame for the failure, in particular discussing the role of Fidel Castro in calling the strike. In reality, this discussion has more to do with

post-1959 political considerations and, interesting as this may be, an investigation of the effect that the events had on the subsequent actions of the various protagonists is more useful in gaining an understanding of the revolutionary process. In this context, the other main decision taken by the M-26-7 at Altos de Mompié, to give priority to the guerrilla struggle, while at first sight looking like a turn away from the tactic of a general strike, in fact produced the conditions that would make such a strike possible.

Chapter 7. Last days of Batista

In an interview published shortly after the rebel victory in 1959, Faustino Pérez asserted that one of the reasons for the failure of the April 9th strike was that workers would not strike without adequate armed support.⁶⁶⁸ The turn to a more militaristic approach by the M-26-7 was not taken with a view to rectifying this inadequacy, but it did have that effect in the long term. Going on strike in Batista's Cuba could be a life or death decision and workers had to feel some confidence in their chances of survival and in the possibilities of successfully gaining a result that would be in their political and economic interests. In the summer of 1958, however, the guerrillas still had to beat the encircling forces of Batista's army which outnumbered them enormously. The events of the victory of the rebel army are well known, hence this chapter will concern itself with the less well known contribution of the working class underground.

The rebel victory would give the M-26-7 the most prominent position in the opposition forces and pave the way for a general strike that would sweep the July 26th Movement to power at the beginning of January 1959. The significance of this strike has been widely underestimated and little work has been done to investigate how Fidel Castro was in a position to successfully call a strike when, only 9 months before, his previous call had fallen so flat. Of course the military victory was of great importance but was not sufficient by itself for the M-26-7 to win power. Rather the defeat of the government forces gave the workers the confidence to believe that they could go on strike without being brutalised by the security forces, who had been thoroughly demoralised by their treatment at the hands of a numerically inferior force. Moreover, nationwide general strikes require considerable organisation. As the August 1957 strike shows, such spontaneity required organisation.

This chapter will trace the development of that organisation, through the unity discussions between the July 26th Movement and the communists, the organisation of two workers congresses in rebel held territory and the marginalisation of the *mujalista* trade union bureaucracy. This shows the way in which the revolutionary general strike that overthrew Batista was organised and proved so powerful that it pulled the rest of the population in behind it. This revisionist narrative seeks to provide evidence for the assertion that there was a convergence between the PSP and the M-26-7 well before the rebel victory, that communists played a significant role in the success of the revolution

⁶⁶⁸ *Bohemia* (19th April 1959) pp.111-2

and that the general strike of January 1959 was the result of a high level of working class organisation and was crucial to the triumph of the revolution.

Summer Offensive

In April 1958, the British Vice-Consul in Santiago was quite clear that, in the provinces, the government's situation was increasingly precarious and that "*everyone, rich as well as poor, appears to be in favour of Castro*".⁶⁶⁹ Despite thinking that "*the present government has done more for Cuba than all previous administrations put together*", he was clear that "*one of the reasons that the rebels have enjoyed so much immunity is in the very poor type of man in the Cuban army. Being armed, they are living on the fat of the land, for every one of them is a grafter and has little inclination to get shot*".⁶⁷⁰ The British Ambassador rather dourly added that "*the Army is disinclined to undertake heroics*".⁶⁷¹ This negative assessment of the fighting ability and morale of Batista's armed forces was to be born out by the victory of the rebel forces over a government offensive launched in the wake of the failed strike of April 9th 1958. Bonachea recalls the parallel growth in financial support coming from workers through late summer and autumn, as well as the increase in membership of the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, which David Salvador estimated at 15,000 by the end of the year.⁶⁷² The logistical support for the guerrillas that was provided by the workers' underground was vital to their ability to continue the fight, while the rebel victory and the demoralising effect it had on government armed forces gave ever increasing numbers of ordinary working class people the confidence to actively support the revolution.

The priority of the *Sección Obrera* during the fighting was to ensure the logistical support of the guerrilla fighters, but once their victory seemed assured, they turned their attention to the question of uniting all oppositional workers' organisations, which produced a united workers' organisation, the *Frente Obrero Nacional Unido* (FONU or United National Workers' Front), that strengthened the hand of the rebel movement immensely.⁶⁷³ This section recounts this summer unity drive, not only to rescue the events from their present obscurity, but also to support the argument that there was a

⁶⁶⁹ FO371/132164 - AK1015/20 (April 2nd 1958)

⁶⁷⁰ FO371/132164 - AK1015/28 (May 9th 1958)

⁶⁷¹ FO371/132164 - AK1015/44 (September 29th)

⁶⁷² Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection*, (1974) p.263

Interview with David Salvador (January 9th 1959) in Alexander, *History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002) pp.159&167

⁶⁷³ PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano* (1985) pp.352-360

process of tactical and political convergence between the PSP and the M-26-7 and that this took an organisational form.

Following the defeat of the April 9th strike, Batista attempted to seize the advantage by means of a "summer offensive" which he dubbed *Operación F-F* (*Fase-Final* or *Fin-Fidel*). This offensive planned to use the army's greater fire-power and numerical superiority to militarily crush the rebels in the Sierra Maestra. Given that the dictatorship had somewhere in the region of 10,000 men at its disposal, supported by aircraft and artillery, while the rebels in the Sierra numbered only about 300 armed guerrillas, the outcome did not seem to pose any great problem for Batista. Fidel Castro's recently published account of the fighting from May to August 1958 fleshes out and largely agrees with Bonachea and San Martín's earlier book, showing both how the superior morale of the rebel fighters and intelligent tactical use of the mountainous terrain, enabled this small force to score victory after victory.⁶⁷⁴

The fighting in the Sierra Maestra quickly became the centre of attention for all those opposed to the regime, overshadowing other matters. There is little record of any strikes or demonstrations over the summer of 1958, as it became clear that everything depended on the outcome of the battles in the mountains. In these circumstances, the priority for the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera* was in organising logistical support for the rebel army, sabotage and preparing for a general strike in the event of a rebel military success. In terms of logistical support, the guerrillas in the hills were almost totally dependent for food and clothing on supporters in the towns. Money could be raised from middle class supporters and by 'taxing' employers in the areas under rebel control, but this still had to be converted into material support. For this, workers in shops, warehouses and distribution depots proved valuable by large scale pilfering of essentials. Railway workers were able to move these supplies under the noses of the police, while bus drivers formed propaganda distribution networks. Telephone operators in Santiago and Guantánamo eavesdropped on police conversations, reporting the information thus gleaned to the rebels. One particularly useful source of supplies was the US base in Guantánamo Bay. In addition to the day to day items which could be pilfered, a quantity of arms and ammunition was purchased from US Navy personnel. There was a considerable level of sympathy among the US sailors on the base and many contributed financially to the cause, while some security guards were prepared to turn a blind eye to

⁶⁷⁴ Castro, *La Victoria Estratégica* (2010)
Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection* (1974) pp.226-265

contraband material being smuggled out of the base.⁶⁷⁵ Without such support, the chances of the rebels resisting the regular army would have been slim indeed.

The government attempted to hide its failure to defeat the rebels by the imposition of strict media censorship. This was largely unsuccessful because the rebels had a radio station, *Radio Rebelde*, operating from the Sierra Maestra. This clandestine radio clearly had a powerful transmitter as its broadcasts were monitored by both the BBC World Service and at least one Mexican radio station.⁶⁷⁶ The script of one broadcast, in the name of *Radio FON*, survives. As well as appealing for support for the continuing struggle of the *campesinos* on land owned by King Ranch in Camagüey, it appeals to the common soldiers not to shoot their brother workers and either change sides or go home, saying that they were fighting for nothing in order to enrich their corrupt officers.⁶⁷⁷ This appeal to the ordinary soldiers to change sides is a common theme at this time. In a similar vein, the *Comité Obrero Revolucionario de San Miguel del Padrón* issued a leaflet saying that not all the police were torturers and murderers, but those who did dishonour their uniform would be severely punished by future people's courts.⁶⁷⁸ The army and police, while they had demonstrated ruthless efficiency when shooting down poorly armed students or unarmed striking workers, were not nearly so determined when faced with well trained and politically motivated guerrillas. Army officers were frequently appointed and promoted more for their loyalty to Batista than for their martial competence. The rebel tactic of giving honourable and decent treatment to all military prisoners encouraged many to surrender or change sides. On the other hand, the well known brutality of the military caused many guerrillas to fight to the death rather than surrender and face possible torture.

The rebel forces defeated the regime's summer offensive by August 1958, boosting the morale of the entire opposition and confirming the July 26th Movement as the real leader of the anti-Batista struggle. This position is highlighted by the terms of the Pact of Caracas, signed by all the opposition tendencies except the PSP on July 20th 1958. This gave the M-26-7 complete freedom of movement, while agreeing a united front of the opposition; a position recognising the *de-facto* submission of the rest of the

⁶⁷⁵ Toirac, *El Movimiento Obrero en la Base Naval Norteamericana* (1988) pp.3-8
Lipman, *Interview with the co-ordinator of the M-26-7 in the US base at Guantánamo* (2004)
Bornot, *Esa tarde me pusieron a la frontera* (1975) p.187

⁶⁷⁶ FO 371/132164/5 - AK1015/47 & AK1015/56

⁶⁷⁷ IHC 1/8:14/4.1/1-10, FON, "*Radio FON*" (1958)

⁶⁷⁸ IHC 1/8:13/27.1/2, Comité Obrero Revolucionario de San Miguel del Padrón, "*¡No Hay Que Confundir!*" (1958)

opposition to rebel army leadership. The agreement spoke quite clearly of the tactic to be employed: "an armed insurrection culminating in a great general strike on the civilian front".⁶⁷⁹ The PSP was not included in the Pact of Caracas and protested loudly in *Carta Semanal* for three weeks, then said no more as moves started towards separate discussions between the CNDDO and the FON.⁶⁸⁰

While the national meeting of the M-26-7 leadership, held at Altos de Mompié, had decided to work together with the PSP, little progress was made over the summer. However there was one campaign on which both groups expended some energy, taking a very similar line: the long running dispute at Coca-Cola. Twenty-six workers in the soft-drinks company, some members of the PSP and others supporters of the M-26-7, as well as independent militants, were dismissed. Their offence, according to both *Vanguardia Obrera* and *Carta Semanal*, was to "be against the dictatorship and the corrupt and traitorous leadership of the CTC".⁶⁸¹ This started a campaign to boycott Coca-Cola and the soft-drink workers dispatched committees to seek support from other workers. The CTC leadership tried to defuse the issue by negotiating the reinstatement of the 26, provided they signed papers renouncing all political activity; a compromise denounced as shameful by the workers concerned.⁶⁸² The campaign was a live issue for the rest of the year and they were only reinstated following the fall of Batista. Such collaboration at rank and file level helped the arguments of those in both organisations who wanted joint activity. So, once the government's summer offensive was repulsed, the leadership of the M-26-7 turned its attention to the question of the workers' movement.

Jesús Soto (Figure 34), a textile worker from the Havana suburbs and a strong advocate of collaboration, tells us that Raúl Castro called a meeting of the provincial leaderships of the FON in the Sierra Cristal.⁶⁸³ This took place on the 12th September 1958 and consisted of, Eliseo Camaño, representing Pinar del Río, David Salvador, Jesús Soto and José María de la Aguilera, representing Havana, Quinto Torres representing Las Villas and Heriberto Hernández from Camagüey. By this stage, Octavio Louit had been arrested and Julián Alemán had been killed, while Níco Torres

⁶⁷⁹ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.172-4

⁶⁸⁰ *Carta Semanal* (August 6th, 13th & 20th 1958)

⁶⁸¹ *Carta Semanal* (July 30th 1958)
Vanguardia Obrera (July 14th 1958)

⁶⁸² *Carta Semanal* (August 27th 1958)

⁶⁸³ Soto, *La constitución del FONU en la clandestinidad*, (n/d) manuscript, collection of Vicente Pérez, copy in author's possession

was now permanently stationed in the *Segundo Frente Oriental "Frank País"*, as the area under the control of Raúl Castro's column in the Sierra Cristal mountains was called.⁶⁸⁴

Following this meeting, Jesús Soto and David Salvador returned to Havana and contacted the PSP to arrange a meeting. David Salvador was arrested before the meeting could take place and Jesús Soto and José María de la Aguilera led for the M-26-7, while Ursinio Rojas and Carlos Rodríguez Careaga spoke on behalf of the PSP.⁶⁸⁵ Sometime in October 1958, it was agreed to form a joint organisation to be known as the *Frente Obrero Nacional Unido* (FONU) but this was only made public on November 12th. Two committees were formed, one of which, comprising Miguel Quintero for the M-26-7 and Carlos Rodríguez Careaga for the PSP was to tour the provinces, charged with bringing the trade union militants of both organisations together in the localities and to form regional, district and municipal sections of the FONU.⁶⁸⁶ However, Carlos Rodríguez Careaga became the first high profile martyr of the FONU, when he was caught up in a police raid at the house near Camagüey of a local communist sugar worker's leader, Saturnino Aneiro.⁶⁸⁷ Both were beaten to death. The other committee went to Las Villas to help with the organisation of a sugar workers' conference.

The political changes that happened within and between the M-26-7 and the PSP are of immense importance for the revolutionary process and it is significant that this coming together started at the working class base of both organisations. Indeed, the M-26-7 leadership in the Sierra still kept full knowledge of the rapprochement from their middle-class supporters. There was a solid base for unity, with the pressure coming from the already existing "committees of workers unity" discussed in chapter 5 above. This new-found collaboration would have its most complete expression in the "Workers' Congresses in Liberated Territory".

Two Workers' Congresses

Once formed, FONU occupied itself with preparations for a general strike to overthrow the regime. Of particular significance in this respect were the two workers' congresses organised in the Sierra Cristal mountains and in northern Las Villas.

⁶⁸⁴ Figueras, *Semblanza de Antonio Torres Chedebaux* (n/d)

⁶⁸⁵ IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/85 (October 28th 1958) CNDDO, "*Salvamos la vida de David Salvador*" Soto, *La Constitución del FONU en la Clandestinidad* (n/d)

⁶⁸⁶ Soto, *La Constitución del FONU en la Clandestinidad* (n/d)

⁶⁸⁷ IHC 1/8:15/3.1/24A.1 (November 28th 1958) FONU "*Denuncia el asasenato de Carlos Rodriguez*"

Learning one of the lessons of the failures of April 1958, this next strike was planned to start in January 1959 to coincide with the start of the sugar harvest, thereby maximising its economic effect. In the event, these preparations had to be brought forward to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the flight of Batista on New Year's Day 1959.

Two "Workers' Congresses in Liberated Territory" took place at the end of 1958, one in the Sierra Cristal mountains in the area controlled by the *Segundo Frente Oriental "Frank País"*, led by Raúl Castro, and the other in northern Las Villas province in the area controlled by rebel forces under the command of Camilo Cienfuegos.⁶⁸⁸ Despite the fact that they give us a valuable insight into the state of working class politics at this crucial time, these two meetings have been largely ignored in the literature, perhaps overshadowed by the more dramatic events taking place on the guerrilla fronts as the rebel army turned the tide in its battles with Batista's forces. These two meetings were important events in themselves, the difficulties involved in assembling several hundred delegates in conditions of dictatorship and civil war showing an impressive level of organisation. Furthermore, these congresses gave the rebel movement considerably increased legitimacy in working class circles, showing that the opposition forces amongst organised labour were publicly united and capable of creating an alternative organisational structure.⁶⁸⁹ As such they played an important role in undermining the last remaining credibility of the *mujalista* CTC bureaucracy.

Soon after establishing the *Segundo Frente Oriental 'Frank País'* in March 1958, Raúl Castro set up a *Buró Obrero* (Workers' executive) to regulate industrial relations in the area under his command. In the early days of October of that year, Níco Torres, in his role as national co-ordinator of the *Sección Obrera*, transferred to the Sierra Cristal to run the M-26-7's intervention in the labour movement from there, as well as heading the *Segundo Frente Oriental Buró Obrero*.⁶⁹⁰ Conrado Béquer, now a wanted man, joined him although, perhaps relieved to be able to discard the double life he had been living, expended most of his energy on a newly assigned combat role.⁶⁹¹ A successful *Congreso Campesino* (Peasant congress) had been organised on September 21st, a few

⁶⁸⁸ García Pérez, *Insurrección y Revolución* (2006) p.185

⁶⁸⁹ Poveda Díaz, *Interview with Alcibiades Poveda Díaz* (2009)

⁶⁹⁰ Soto, *La Constitución del FONU* (n/d)

Pérez *Interview with Vicente Pérez* (2008)

Figueras, *Semblanza de Antonio Torres Chedebaux* (n/d)

Thomas, *Cuba* (1998) pp.1007&1010

⁶⁹¹ *Bohemia* (January 11th 1959) p.102

days before Torres's arrival, to discuss the problems of the peasant farmers of the region.⁶⁹² It was decided to organise a similar event for the sugar workers and a preparatory plenary meeting took place in El Signal on October 23rd.⁶⁹³ This was initially called to consider how to deal with those sugar plantations in the area under rebel control, particularly the refusal of the employers to start repairs on their refineries in advance of the coming *zafra*. This situation was causing immense concern amongst the region's 36,000 sugar workers who suspected that the employers were deliberately attempting to undermine support for the rebel army.⁶⁹⁴ In the event, the discussions at the plenary soon expanded and, given the imminent launch of the FONU, it was decided to call a delegate conference representing all workers opposed to the regime.⁶⁹⁵ This meeting was significant in being one of the first such meetings open to all political tendencies, including the communists. However, when the practicalities of assembling the delegates in the far east of the island for a national meeting were considered by the national leadership of the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, now composed of Níco Torres, Conrado Béquer and José Pellón, a distillery worker, it was decided to call two congresses, one near Guantánamo for delegates from Oriente and the other for sugar workers in the recently liberated area of northern Las Villas province.⁶⁹⁶ Meanwhile, on the question of starting the preparation for the sugar harvest, an "intervention committee", jointly staffed by rebel soldiers and sugar workers forced the issue. They toured the area under the control of the *Segundo Frente Oriental 'Frank País'*, ensuring that repairs were started, at gunpoint where necessary.⁶⁹⁷

The *Congreso Obrero en Armas*, as the conference in the Sierra Cristal was called, started on December 8th. Delegates from areas under rebel control were elected in open assemblies but, where this was not possible, they were designated by local cells of the M-26-7 and/or the PSP. The industries represented included railway, sugar, ports, mining, pharmaceuticals, commerce, medicine, telephones, construction, printing, electricity, carpentry, baking and the US base; 110 delegates in all.⁶⁹⁸ Many had a great

⁶⁹² Regalado, *Las luchas campesinas en Cuba* (1979) pp.162-165

⁶⁹³ Comisión Nacional de Historia, *Provincia Guantánamo* (1980) p.10
Sección de historia, *Reseña histórica de Guantánamo* (1985) p.156

⁶⁹⁴ Cardona Bory, *Memorias del Congreso Obrero en Armas* (c 1995) n.pag

⁶⁹⁵ Sección de Historia, *Reseña histórica de Guantánamo* (1985) p.156

Comisión Nacional de Historia, *Provincia Guantánamo* (1980)p.10

Figueras, *Interview with Luis Figueras* (2009)

⁶⁹⁶ Soto, *La Constitución del FONU en la Clandestinidad* (n/d)

⁶⁹⁷ Quesada González, *El congreso obrero en armas* (1999) pp.86

⁶⁹⁸ Sección de Historia, *Reseña histórica de Guantánamo* (1985) p.159

Cardona Bory, *Memorias del Congreso Obrero en Armas* (c 1995) n.pag

deal of trouble getting there, for instance the delegates from the US base in Guantánamo had to walk and did not arrive until the 10th.⁶⁹⁹ Twelve delegates from Santiago attempted to have the communist delegates barred from the meeting and, when they lost the vote, withdrew.⁷⁰⁰ Following a report from Níco Torres, the congress approved the formation of the FONU, pledged total support for the rebel army and set out a familiar list of economic demands.⁷⁰¹ Given that the congress appears to have adopted very similar policies to the other conference in Las Villas, let us pass directly to a discussion of that event of which we have more details.

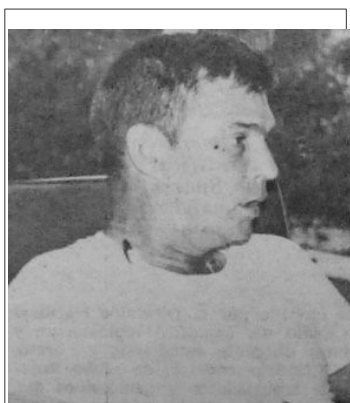


Figure 34: Gerado Nogueras in 1972 from *Bohemia* (October 27th 1972)

When the rebel detachment led by Camilo Cienfuegos arrived in Las Villas on October 7th 1958, he found a small PSP guerrilla group under the leadership of Felix Torres. Government repression had been particularly severe in the region and many communist militants had been forced underground, where they took up arms against the regime.⁷⁰² They had met with a certain hostility from the local M-26-7 leadership, but Camilo Cienfuegos was *au fait* with the new policy of co-operation with the communists as his first proclamation indicates;⁷⁰³ indeed Osvaldo Sánchez of the PSP was acting as one of the liaison couriers linking Camilo Cienfuegos with Fidel Castro.⁷⁰⁴ The most public demonstration of the new approach was that Gerado Nogueras (Figure 34), an experienced PSP workers' leader was appointed to run the *Comisión Obrera* (Workers' committee), which the invading column set up upon its arrival.⁷⁰⁵ The agreement seems to have been that the PSP was given the chair of the workers' committee in return for Felix Torres and his group submitting to M-26-7 direction. Tito Igualada of the 26th July Movement was appointed Gerado Nogueras's deputy, while Ramón "Mongo" Simonaca of the PSP was given responsibility for organising the *campesinos* (Figure

⁶⁹⁹ Lipman, *Interview with the co-ordinator of the M-26-7 group in the US base at Guantánamo* (2004)

⁷⁰⁰ Figueras, *Semblanza de Antonio Torres Chedebaux* (n/d)

⁷⁰¹ Cardona Bory, *Memorias del Congreso Obrero en Armas* (c 1995) n.pag
Quesada González, *El congreso obrero en armas* (1999) pp.85-88

⁷⁰² Testimony of Arnaldo Milián in Gávelz, *Camilo* (1979) p.340-343

Testimony of Alberto Torres in Gávelz, *Camilo* (1979) p.374-376

⁷⁰³ Bell Lara *Fase insurreccional de la Revolución Cubana*, (2007) pp. 258-259

Díaz Pendás, *Textos sobre Historia de Cuba* (2009) pp.263-263

⁷⁰⁴ Testimony of Alberto Torres in Gávelz, *Camilo* (1979) p.379

⁷⁰⁵ Letter from Camilo Cienfuegos "A los trabajadores de la ruta 35 y 48" (November 14th 1958) cited in "¡Vamos bien!" *Suplemento de Granma* (31st December 1974) p.46

Letter from Camilo Cienfuegos to Alfredo Milián (November 14th 1958) William Gálvez personal collection

).⁷⁰⁶ The principal task of the workers' committee was to organise assemblies on the sugar plantations and in the *centrales* in the province in order to elect new union representatives and to prepare for a sugar workers' conference, as well as providing logistical support for the guerrillas from the local rural population.⁷⁰⁷

When the column first arrived in northern Las Villas, delegations of sugar workers came looking for support for their demands, complaining of poor treatment by their employers and the army.⁷⁰⁸ William Gálvez, an officer in the invading column, recalls that the rebel soldiers, most of whom were from urban backgrounds, were shocked by the levels of rural poverty.⁷⁰⁹ While with hindsight we know the regime would only survive for another two months, the rebels were planning for a much longer campaign. It has already been mentioned that the founding meeting of the FONU had formed a committee to convene a conference of sugar workers.⁷¹⁰ This was composed of Jesús Soto, Ursinio Rojas, José María de la Aguilera and Lila León, a Havana office worker and member of the M-26-7.⁷¹¹ At the beginning of December, they sent a letter to Che Guevara by the hand of Lila León requesting his support, which received a favourable response.⁷¹² Following discussions with Camilo Cienfuegos, it was decided to send Ursinio Rojas to Las Villas to help the local *Comisión Obrera* with the preparations.⁷¹³ The others followed on the 14th.



Figure 35: Tito Igualada & Mongo Simonaca in 1972 from *Bohemia* (October 27th 1972)

As soon as local workplaces in the area under the influence of the rebels in northern Las Villas had started to reorganise, the *Comisión Obrera* called a series of district meetings to prepare for the congress. Camilo Cienfuegos personally chaired a meeting of workers from *San Agustín* and *Adela centrales* in the Alicante district in mid-November and planned to chair a larger meeting on the

⁷⁰⁶ Testimony of Alberto Torres in Gálvez, *Camilo* (1979) p.378

⁷⁰⁷ IHC 1/8:15/2.1/2-22, FONU, "*Informe de la conferencia azucarera*" (December 1958)

⁷⁰⁸ Testimony of Arnaldo Milián in Gálvez, *Camilo* (1979) p.340-343

⁷⁰⁹ Gálvez, *Camilo* (1979) pp.284-6

⁷¹⁰ IHC 1/8:15./2.1/1 (November 1958) FONU "*Conferencia de azucareros*"

⁷¹¹ Soto, *La Constitución del FONU en la Clandestinidad* (n/d)
Pérez, *Interview with Vicente Pérez* (2008)

⁷¹² Soto, *La Constitución del FONU en la Clandestinidad* (n/d)

⁷¹³ Testimony of Ursinio Rojas in Sarusky, *Camilo* (1972) pp.59-65

Testimony of Ursinio Rojas in Gálvez, *Camilo* (1979) pp.391-393

28th.⁷¹⁴ In the event, he was caught in fighting in the Escambray mountains and delegated the responsibility to William Galvéz.⁷¹⁵ There were many similar meetings held during the second half of November and the early part of December and Tito Iguialada recalls a particularly militant assembly held in Güebara where 800 sugar workers elected new officials and planned the organisation of workers in areas not yet under rebel control.⁷¹⁶ A similar assembly on the 7th December in Jobo Rosado was attacked by aircraft of Batista's air force, but continued after the all clear.⁷¹⁷

The final resolution of the plenary held on November 28th survives and provides some indication of the political feelings amongst the sugar workers of north Las Villas.⁷¹⁸ The resolution speaks of 728 delegates meeting under the protection of the invading column "Antonio Maceo", commanded by Camilo Cienfuegos, with the intention of discussing the demands for the forthcoming *zafra* as well as the wider political and social objectives of the Cuban people. It was resolved to:

1. *Recognise the FONU as the leadership of the Cuban workers until such time as they might freely and democratically elect their leaders.*
2. *Declare the following 7th December a day of struggle against the dictatorship.*
3. *Call upon all sugar workers in Las Villas to prepare to fight for their demands for the forthcoming zafra. Call upon all other workers to fight for their own demands and in solidarity with the sugar workers.*
4. *Call upon all businessmen and industrialists to support the rebels' political demands, as this is the only way they can develop their businesses with prosperity, respect and peace.*
5. *Call upon the campesinos, small cane farmers and professionals to join the fight of the Cuban people.*
6. *Call upon all members of the armed forces who are not complicit in murder and other bestial activities to cross over to the ranks of the rebel forces.*
7. *Condemn all countries that sell arms to the dictatorship, particularly the United States and England. These weapons are used to bomb and kill peaceful citizens.*
8. *For all Cubans, irrespective of social or political divisions to unite against the blood-stained government.*
9. *To raise the following economic demands*
 - *For a wage rise not less than 10%*
 - *For a diferencial of 4.2%*
 - *For the re-employment of all those dismissed or forced to leave their jobs by*

⁷¹⁴ Testimony of Mongo Simanca in Sarusky, *Camilo* (1972) pp.59-65

⁷¹⁵ Testimony of Felipe Torres and Alfredo Milán in Gálvez, *Camilo* (1979) pp.338-341

⁷¹⁶ Testimony of Tito Iguialada in Sarusky, *Camilo* (1972) pp.59-65

⁷¹⁷ Testimony of Gerado Noguerras and Tito Iguialada in Sarusky, *Camilo* (1972) pp.59-65

⁷¹⁸ Testimony of Ursinio Rojas in Sarusky, *Camilo* (1972) pp.59-65

repression

- *For land to be given to those agricultural workers who wish to cultivate it during the tiempo muerto*
- *Against the compulsory payment of union dues, but in favour of voluntary payment*
- *For the payment of advances in wages free of interest*
- *For price reductions for basic household necessities*
- *For recognition of directly elected workers' representatives. Until elections are possible, recognition of the clandestine comités de lucha*
- *Clean up the living quarters and rebuild our houses*
- *For a general amnesty for all political and social prisoners, including those members of the armed forces who have been condemned for opposing the present regime*
- *For an end to censorship*
- *Re-establish constitutional guarantees*
- *For a provisional democratic government that will organise democratic elections as soon as possible in which all groups and parties opposed to the dictatorship may participate*
- *For the return of all exiles so that they may resume their political activities*
- *Dissolve the BRAC, SIM and all other repressive bodies*
- *For the detention and condemnation of the assassin Pilar García and all others in the uniform of the armed forces who committed crimes and atrocities against the Cuban people*
- *For the most energetic condemnation of any nation that sold arms to the Batista dictatorship which were used to instil terror in the civilian population*⁷¹⁹

The first thing which should be noted is that this is a significant number of delegates, particularly given the circumstances in which it was called. It represents a qualitative increase in the strength and influence of the rebels within the labour movement, when compared to April 1958. What is most striking about the list of demands is their essential moderation. There is nothing here which is incompatible with a capitalist economy.⁷²⁰ Given the earlier campaign for a 20% wage increase and a much larger *diferencial* than 4.2%, the comparatively low figures are surprising. The demands are posed in the context of a patriotic cross-class alliance and it may have been that the sugar workers did not wish to alienate potential middle-class support for the rebels. However, given that the FONU nationally was calling for a 20% increase and a 40% price cut on basic items, it is unlikely that the FONU leadership was trying to restrict workers' demands.⁷²¹ It is more likely that, in the face of the brutality of a dying regime, the workers' main concern was indeed to overthrow the government. There is also

⁷¹⁹ IHC 1/8:15/4.1/1-2, FONU, "*Resolución de la plenaria azucarera del Norte de Las Villas*" (November 30th 1958) [my translation]

⁷²⁰ Córdova, *Clase Trabajadora y Movimiento Sindical vol.1* (1995) p.112

⁷²¹ IHC 1/8:15/3.1/1, FONU, "*Manifiesto*" (November 30th 1958)

nothing in the list of demands which is incompatible with the previously held positions of either the M-26-7 or the PSP. There clearly was some debate over the forms of words to be used and the hand of the PSP can be seen in the detailed nature of many of the economic demands. Nevertheless, there are no substantive differences between this document and the previously issued statements of both parties, indicating that, at least amongst the militants active in the labour movement, political convergence had already occurred. The fact that there is little difference between the statements issued before and after the congress would seem to indicate that the rank and file delegates were also happy with the new situation.

This interpretation is born out by a manifesto issued the same day in the name of *la Plenaria regional de trabajadores azucareros de la zona norte de Las Villas* addressed to *Los trabajadores azucareros de Las Villas*. This manifesto closely linked the economic demands with the fight for the political demands of the whole Cuban people, saying how this link made the fight over that year's *zafra* the most crucial ever. It urged sugar workers to turn their struggle into a wave of unstoppable resistance, which would lead the rest of the working class and all other classes of patriotic Cubans into a battle to overthrow the regime. Only by this method, it continued, could workers regain their rights and their self-respect. The manifesto concluded by claiming the position of honour for sugar workers, the most oppressed by the regime, who can become the vanguard of the struggle against tyranny. Such stirring rhetoric is evidence of a confidence that was lacking before the arrival of the rebel column.⁷²²

Guerrilla fighters from the rebel column in Las Villas started visiting the employers in the region, assigning to each one a tribute or "revolutionary tax" that they would be required to pay before they would be allowed to start harvesting sugar.⁷²³ Employers were also required to recognise the newly elected workers' representatives and meet them to discuss their demands.⁷²⁴ The position of the workers was further boosted by the rebels giving them arms recovered from supporters of the regime and forming them into militia companies, a move which must have further enhanced their position in negotiations with their employers.⁷²⁵ Under the protection of the rebel soldiers and their own militias, local union assemblies prepared for the congress with traditional formality. For example, the workers of *central Natividad* in Guasimal, Las

⁷²² IHC 1/8:15/4.1/3-4, FONU, "*Manifiesto a los trabajadores de Las Villas*" (November 30th 1958)

⁷²³ Testimony of Gerado Noguera in Sarusky, *Camilo* (1972) p.63

⁷²⁴ Testimony of Ramón Simanca in Gálvez, *Camilo* (1979) pp.387-390

⁷²⁵ Testimony of Gerado Noguera in Sarusky, *Camilo* (1972) p.63

Villas, sent written motions to the congress calling for a 40% reduction in prices for basic items, for interest free loans during the dead season and for equality of pay for the office workers in private companies with those employed by the state.⁷²⁶

It was in this atmosphere of excitement and tension that the "Congress of Sugar Workers in Liberated Territory" was summoned. Initially planned to take place in the Escambray mountains, the military situation forced a change of plan and its eventual location was the small town of General Carrillo where Camilo Cienfuegos had his headquarters. Between six and seven hundred delegates took part, coming from all over Las Villas, from Camagüey, Havana province, Matanzas and Pinar del Rio. There were no delegates from Oriente because of the travel difficulties in time of war but, as described above, they had already held their congress in the Sierra Cristal. Ursinio Rojas delivered the keynote address, while the platform consisted of both M-26-7 and PSP speakers.⁷²⁷

The report of the organising committee, which is paraphrased below, started by condemning Mujal's assertion that Cuba was prosperous due to rises in the price of sugar, arguing that the workers themselves had not benefited. The recent small salary increases that had been forced on the government had been eaten by inflation. Meanwhile mechanisation and *intensivismo* had increased productivity at the expense of thousands of jobs and accidents at work. While the workers' incomes between 1953 and 1957 had reduced by a total of 753 million pesos, the employers' profits had gone up enormously. Comparison was made between the years 1957 and 1951, which both had the same harvest of about 5 million tons, while the sugar price for 1957 had risen back to 5.2¢ per pound, similar to the price of 5.29¢ per pound in 1951. The profits declared for 1951 had been 106 million pesos but this figure had risen to 135 million pesos in 1957 while the total wage bill, at 321 million pesos, was 90 million pesos less. The report argued that this was partly because of wage cuts and partly because increased mechanisation had enabled the same volume to be harvested in thirteen days less. In the days before Mujal and Batista, there had been an agreement to compensate workers for such "*superproducción*", but they had only received compensation for 5 days loss of work rather than the 13 they were owed. The minimum wage had been reduced from \$3.14 per day to \$2.80. On top of this "official" reduction, union inactivity and state terror has permitted many employers to pay even less. The report concluded from this

⁷²⁶ IHC 1/8:15/2.1/30-32, Sindicato del central Natividad "*Mociones*" (December 21st 1958)

⁷²⁷ Soto, *La Constitution del FONU en la Clandestinidad* (n/d)

that the *zafra* could not continue under these conditions and the list of demands adopted by the *Plenaria regional de trabajadores azucareros de la zona norte de Las Villas* (outlined above) was proposed.

The main question under discussion, the report continued, was to determine how to organise the struggle for these demands. Previous struggles had failed for lack of unity, which is why the FONU has been formed. It was seen as being of vital importance to build unity and a large number of *Comités de Unidad* (Unity committees) had already been set up. The other matter considered to be important was the development and strengthening of the rebel army. Important victories had been won over the army of the dictatorship and the rebels were dominant in Oriente, north and south Las Villas, parts of Camagüey, Matanzas and Pinar del Rio. The document therefore claimed that the conditions existed for a successful general strike which, combined with revolutionary military activity, could bring down the dictatorship.

In areas where the rebels were in control, the report argued that the struggle would be easy. As soon as the employers agreed to the workers' demands, and the presence of rebel soldiers would assist in this, there was no reason not to immediately start the harvest. Where the dictatorship was still in control, the fight would be more difficult, but sugar workers had great experience learned from previous struggles. The report continued by saying that an essential part of this struggle would be to build the FONU, firstly in the workplaces and then at municipal and district level, with a view to calling a strike of all the sugar workers who work in areas still under the control of the dictatorship. The sugar workers were described as the vanguard of workers' movement and solidarity would be sought from all other workers, as well as from small businesses, professionals and small farmers, leading to a revolutionary general strike. It concluded by saying that this strike would have the full support and protection of the rebel army and sugar workers would do all they can to assist the rebel victory.⁷²⁸

The hand of the PSP is clearly visible in the phrasing of this document. The close interlinking of immediate economic demands with anti-dictatorial political demands is typical of their approach to propaganda. The frequent references to "unity" and the formula of "*a democratic patriotic government to implement agrarian reform, develop national industry, freely trade with all countries, end racial discrimination, for peace*

⁷²⁸ IHC 1/8:15/2.1/2-22, FONU, "*Informe de la conferencia azucarera*" (December 1958) Brown, *The Impact of Revolutionary Politics on the Autonomy of Organized Labor in Cuba* (1965) pp21-22

and national progress" with which the report ends, also reflects communist political concerns.⁷²⁹ M-26-7 propaganda at this time tended to be much less specific in its demands and generally contained much more revolutionary rhetoric. Equally, the exact nature of the calculations of the amount of money lost as a result of mechanisation and wage cuts is also much more in the communist style. At this time, there was a clandestine member of the PSP, Alfredo Menéndez, working as an economist in the Ministry of Sugar, who had access to the data necessary to prepare such a detailed account.⁷³⁰ On the other hand, the call for a revolutionary general strike was the main priority of the M-26-7, who based all their propaganda around this slogan. The idea that the general strike should be started by the sugar workers around both their economic demands and as a clear attempt to overthrow the regime shows how much the rebels had learnt since the fiasco of the previous April.

The congress obviously had a very real effect on the morale and politics of the participants. It gave a great boost to unity moves in the whole province and assemblies were held in many places to elect *comités de unidad obrera* (Committees of workers unity).⁷³¹ These were decided on the basis of parity between the revolutionary organisations and places were also given to two other minor opposition groups, the *Organización Auténtica* (OA) and the *Directorio Revolucionario* (DR), who had little implantation in the working class, but who had made some contribution to the fighting. In Santa Clara, the *Comité de Unidad Obrera* allocated seats to the OA and DR even though there was no-one to fill them.⁷³² In the period which followed, the idea of a united front between the PSP and the M-26-7 came under attack from some elements within the latter organisation, but was never seriously challenged in Las Villas province.

United Front

The nature of the alliance between the workers' organisations of the PSP and the M-26-7 took the form of a united front. The implementation of this was viewed differently by the two component parts and it may be useful to explore the nature of the relationships within the FONU as we find here the origins of the early disagreements between the parties during the first year of the revolutionary government.

⁷²⁹ [my translation]

⁷³⁰ Menéndez, *Interview with Alfredo Menéndez* (2009)

⁷³¹ Soto, *La Constitución del FONU en la Clandestinidad* (n/d)

⁷³² IHC 1/8:13/36.1/3, Comité de Unidad Obrera de Las Villas, "*A Los Trabajadores*" (January 6th 1959)



Figure 36: *Carta Semanal* (December 10th 1958)

The FONU did not become a real organisation at national level, but was an important ideological symbol of unity. The agreement formulated in October called for the setting up of a formal structure but, given the difficulties of clandestine organisation, this was not possible and the organisation was run on an *ad hoc* basis. Both *Vanguardia Obrera* and *Carta Semanal* continued publication. The CNDDO also continued to issue leaflets in its own name, but one of the first to follow the founding of the FONU was a leaflet calling for action to save the life of David Salvador,

who was at that time still under arrest in Havana, saying that he was a workers' leader from the FONU. There were, however, no more statements issued in the name of the FONU. It is interesting to compare two leaflets written about the murder of Carlos Rodríguez Careaga and Saturnino Aneiro. The first dated 27th November and published in the name of the national committee of the CNDDO, refers to Rodríguez as secretary general of that organisation and makes no mention of the FONU. The second, issued in the name of the national executive committee of the FONU, but clearly written by the same hand, stresses his contribution to workers' unity.⁷³³ *Carta Semanal* displayed its enthusiasm for the new strategy combining *la lucha armada* with *la lucha de masas* in a series of high profile articles and cartoons (Figure 36) Thus we see that, while they were sincere in their support for united action with the M-26-7, the PSP was intent on making sure that their contribution to the united effort was fully recognised.

It was however not just the communists who were keeping their options open. The M-26-7, when announcing the formation of the FONU in the Santiago edition of *Vanguardia Obrera*, spoke glowingly of the benefits of unity without once mentioning that the unity of which they spoke involved the communists.⁷³⁴ The archives of the Institute of Cuban History contain the first page of a draft of a manifesto announcing the formation of the FONU, which has been hand annotated with suggestions for change. The final published version also survives. The draft starts with the fact that the FONU is

⁷³³ IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/85, CNDDO, "*Salvamos la vida de David Salvador*" (October 28th 1958)
 IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/102, CNDDO, "*A todos los trabajadores del país*" (November 27th 1958)
 IHC 1/8:15/1.1/1, FONU, "*A todos los trabajadores del país*" (1958)

⁷³⁴ *Vanguardia Obrera* [Santiago] (December 29th 1958)

a result of an agreement between the CNDDO and the FON, while the published version merely refers to agreement between "*distintas agrupaciones obreras*" (different workers' groups).⁷³⁵ Yet given the effort involved and the considerable danger to which both organisations were exposing themselves, there can be no doubt about the commitment at national level to working together in the labour movement despite the apparent public reticence. One explanation for this seeming contradiction is that the other signatories of the Pact of Caracas were fiercely anti-communist, as were many of the M-26-7 members involved in the Civic Resistance Movement.⁷³⁶ There would have been little to gain from drawing their attention too forcefully to the arrangement with the communists which would operate within the labour movement. On the other hand, we have already seen that in many areas, there already existed a working relationship between communists and July 26th members in the workplace and neighbourhood. These people would know exactly what was meant by "unity" and it would not have been necessary to spell it out. We can see this as an example of the balancing act needed to keep a cross-class movement together in the face of different sectional interests.

It is hardly surprising that the FONU did not have the opportunity to establish itself as a functioning national organisation as, within two months of its formal launch, Batista fled and the regime fell. It was established as a regional entity only in Las Villas and in the area under the influence of the *Segundo Frente Oriental "Frank País"*, where the two conferences and the success of the rebel forces gave the necessary impetus. In Las Villas, Vicente Pérez (Figure 37), a PSP tobacco workers' leader, was appointed regional organiser and there appears to have been a serious attempt to put the principles of uniting the workers' sections of the opposition movements into practice. The FONU became the heir to previous initiatives of its component organisations, for example, a short railway strike had been called by the FON a short time earlier to protest at the late payment of wages by the management of *Ferrocarriles Consolidados*. The next leaflet in the dispute was then issued in the name of the *Frente Obrero Nacional Unido, Comité Ferroviario* (FONU railway committee), which speaks of the success of the strike, condemning the weakness of the *mujalistas* and calling on workers to build the FONU in preparation for the revolutionary general strike.⁷³⁷

⁷³⁵ IHC 1/8:15/1.1/1, FONU, "*A todos los trabajadores del país*" (1958)

IHC 1/8:15/3.1/1, FONU, "*Manifiesto*" (November 10th 1958)

⁷³⁶ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) p.159

⁷³⁷ IHC 1/8:14/1.1/7, FON Las Villas, "*A los Compañeros Ferroviarios*" (1958)

IHC 1/8:15/6.1/1, FONU Ferroviario, "*A los Trabajadores Ferroviarios*" (1958)



Figure 37: Vicente Pérez in 2009, photo by Angelina Rojas

Given the difficulties of communication in conditions of clandestinity, which were greatly exacerbated by the success of the rebel armies in cutting communications, the spread of a new organisation would necessarily have taken time. *Carta Semanal* did not publish the FONU manifesto until December 3rd 1958, while the local edition of *Vanguardia Obrera* in Santiago did not announce the formation of the FONU until December 29th 1958.⁷³⁸ There is nothing sinister in this delay, which merely reflected the difficulties of communication and publication under a dictatorial regime. In areas where there were already working relationships between communist and July 26th Movement workers, particularly where there was some existing form of *Comité de Unidad*, the process would have been quick and easy. On the other hand, there was still considerable hostility towards the communist party in some sections of the M-26-7, particularly in Havana, and this would not have disappeared because of a change in line from above. The new approach would have caused debate, disagreement and, where there was a majority who were sceptical of the benefits of unity, there would have been no great urgency to start the process. Equally, some areas of the PSP were set in their ways and clung to the old "*lucha de masas*" approach, which had condemned armed action as terrorist. These would have viewed the new organisation with suspicion and been slow to embrace the new line. As a result, the establishment of local or workplace FONU groups or unity committees was a very varied patchwork, strongest in areas closest to the sites of the two workers' congresses and weakest in Havana.

The fact that the two organisations had agreed to work together did not mean that there was no longer any rivalry between them. The M-26-7 still had a view of unity that was based on their hegemony rather than consensus or compromise, while the PSP considered itself to be the only real "party of the working class".⁷³⁹ Such political rivalry is not unusual inside any united front, after all, if the constituent parts of an alliance agree completely, they might as well merge. In addition, the formation of a united front does not imply that the organisations involved will treat the new relationship as their highest priority. In this case, both organisations had ongoing projects within the milieu of the labour movement and, for the people involved, these would retain their priority. The initial reaction to the formation of the FONU at rank and file level inside the

⁷³⁸ *Carta Semanal* (December 3rd 1958)

Vanguardia Obrera [Santiago] (December 29th 1958)

⁷³⁹ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) p.157

M-26-7 and the PSP would be to see the new formation in terms of its contribution to those existing projects. Thus, for example, the December 10th edition of *Carta Semanal* does not mention the FONU until page two and then ignores it until the end of the statement on page 4 which places the slogan "*Strengthen the FONU*" amongst many others in a long list although, at the top, we find "*Build Unity Committees in every workplace*".⁷⁴⁰

Santiago provides us with an example of the reality of collaboration in an area where there was considerable history of united action, as we have seen earlier in the joint activity of the dockers and the Bacardí workers. However there were also those in the M-26-7 who were opposed to working with the communists, exemplified by the 12 delegates from Santiago who walked out of the *Congreso Obrero en Armas*. A *Comité Municipal de Unidad Obrera* was operating in Santiago in October 1958 which issued a leaflet containing detailed accounts of the grievances of the workers in many local workplaces. It confined itself entirely to economic issues without any mention of the rebel army or a revolutionary general strike. From this it is safe to assume that, at this point in time, the Santiago unity committee was dominated by the PSP with little M-26-7 input. The next leaflet that survives, dated 1st December, is entitled "Against bombardments of the civilian population and against American intervention". It starts with a reference to Fidel Castro Ruz as "Commander in Chief of the Glorious Rebel Army" and roundly condemns the use of aircraft against civilians. It then immediately attacks the possibility of US intervention, as in Korea and Lebanon, and reminds the reader of the level of racial discrimination in the USA, citing the incidents in Little Rock as proof. The demands at the end are: for trade union democracy, united action to overthrow the dictatorship, for a general strike, donate a day's wages to the rebel army, reinstate all dismissed workers and long live the second anniversary of the revolution. This is a leaflet written by a committee, each wanting to get their particular policies included. Thus the anti-imperialist part undoubtedly comes from the PSP, while references to the rebel army are from the M-26-7.⁷⁴¹ The "second anniversary of the revolution" refers to the November 30th fighting in Santiago, which was, as described in

⁷⁴⁰ *Carta Semanal* (December 10th 1958) [my translations]

⁷⁴¹ The M-26-7 stated in 1957 that the term "Imperialism" was "inappropriate to the American continent". See *Nuestra razón: manifiesto-programa del movimiento 26 de julio*. Reprinted in Gonzalez, *La Revolución cubana* (1959) p.124

Chapter 4 above, launched by the M-26-7, but supported by the Santiago PSP against the wishes of their national party leadership; now a point of regional pride.⁷⁴²

The existence of the Santiago *Comité Municipal de Unidad Obrera* did not prevent either organisation continuing with their own propaganda, indeed it seems to have inspired the local M-26-7 to greater efforts. *Vanguardia Obrera* had published a special edition for Oriente province since February 1958. The first two issues were reproductions of the national paper. Thereafter it contained increasing numbers of local references, both to industrial matters and the doings of the rebel army.⁷⁴³ By December 1958, it had moved from a mimeographed format to a much more professional publication. Late 1958 seemed to produce a flurry of sectional publications. Alcibíades Poveda Díaz, head of propaganda for the M-26-7 in Santiago, has examples of several mimeographed journals, *La Voz* for press and radio workers, *Liberación Obrera* for medical workers, *El Portuario* for the dockers and *Pantalla* for the cinematograph workers.⁷⁴⁴ The July 26th *Sección Obrera* also issued a considerable number of manifestos in December 1958 in the name of its various sectoral committees: *Empleados Bancarios, Plantas Eléctricas, Refrescos Cerveza y Licores, del Puerto, del Comercio, Telefonico, del Transporte, Cinematógrafos, Prensa y Radio, de la Medicina, Gastronomico, Textilero, Tabaqueros and Cemento Titan*.⁷⁴⁵ This surge of activity would partly have its origins in an attempt to gain advantage in the changed situation and partly in the enthusiasm generated by the new sense of unity. Such a mixture of co-operation and competition is typical of any united front. Moreover, no united front operates in isolation from the political circumstances in which it is formed. Thus, the feeling that things could not continue as they were, that change was immanent, which had in part been created by the forces of the opposition, in particular the guerrilla forces of the M-26-7, both provided that opposition with an opportunity to force the pace of change still further and the encouragement to attempt to do so. Now, the hope for a general strike, which for so long had been an empty slogan, had become a distinct possibility thanks to the successes of the rebel army.

⁷⁴² IHC 1/8:13/40.1/1-2 - Comité Municipal de Unidad Obrero de Santiago, "*Contra los Desplazamientos*" (October 1958)

IHC 1/8:13/40.1/3-4 - Comité Municipal de Unidad Obrero de Santiago - "*Contra los Bombardeos*" (December 1st 1958) [my translations]

⁷⁴³ *Vanguardia Obrera* [Oriente] various editions from March to December 1958, most undated. Poveda collection [copies in author's possession]

⁷⁴⁴ Poveda, *Propaganda y Revolución en Santiago* (2003) pp.369-374 [copies of documents in the author's possession]

⁷⁴⁵ Poveda collection [copies in author's possession]

The Last Days

The leaflets mentioned above, issued by the July 26th *Sección Obrera* and the *Comité Municipal de Unidad Obrera*, illustrate the crisis that was facing Cuban society in general and the working class in particular. They describe a situation in Santiago, confirmed by a report from the Santiago office of Cable and Wireless, where the Bacardí rum and Hatuey beer factories were virtually closed because the management claimed a shortage of bottles, most port workers were laid off because of a lack of ships coming into harbour, as well as job losses in public transport as a result of cuts in service and similar closures or redundancies in many other industries.⁷⁴⁶ While the propaganda material from the time relates to the anger of the workers at this situation, the lack of concrete proposals, other than a revolutionary general strike, reflects the difficulty faced in organising industrial action when the economy is barely functioning. In such circumstances, workers could react by either blaming the rebels or the government. In this case, the overwhelming majority seem to have held the government responsible and support for the rebels grew as they became seen as the only solution in desperate circumstances. Earlier in the year, following a rise in the official rate of inflation, the government had decreed a rise in the minimum wage and a 4% general wage increase. The Economist Intelligence Unit report saw this as "part of a campaign to keep them on the job and less open to the influence of the rebels". However, this approach by the government was so transparent that it increased M-26-7 influence rather than reducing it, as the rebels were generally given credit for forcing Batista to award the increase. In any case, the official rate of inflation may have been only 2 to 3 %, but the rise in the cost of basic necessities was nearer 20 to 30%, particularly in the east where the fighting made transport difficult. The demand for a reduction in the price of basic items and an end to speculation figures highly on all list of workers' demands at this time. Moreover, any advantage the government might have gained from the increase was nullified by the fact that the increase was not enforced and many employers did not pay it, although they resented being placed in an awkward position.⁷⁴⁷

It has been argued in earlier chapters that support for Batista by employers was based on his ability to drive down wages, decrease staffing levels and generally increase productivity, thereby helping profit margins. In return for this, there was a general

⁷⁴⁶ FO 371/132164 - AK1015/69, *Report from Cable and Wireless manager in Santiago* (November 25th 1958)

⁷⁴⁷ FO371/132191 - AK2181/3, *Trade Unions and Labour Situation in Cuba* (August 21st 1958)
EIU, *Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico* (June 1958)

acceptance by businessmen of the high levels of brutality and corruption associated with the dictatorship. By the end of 1958, a significant proportion of the employing class felt that the government had so mishandled the situation that any change, even a rebel victory, would be an improvement. The sugar magnate Julius Lobo is quoted as saying: "It did not matter to us who got rid of Batista, as long as somebody did".⁷⁴⁸ By December 1958, Batista's inability to ensure normal commercial activity, even to the extent of having lost control of the roads in the east of the island, meant that he had lost any usefulness to the business community.



Figure 38: Derailed armoured train outside Santa Clara, from <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/cuban-revolution.htm>

The pressure from employers to maintain communications in the face of rebel forces cutting roads and blowing bridges gave rise to an attempt to protect the railways by using an armoured train. This was being prepared in the Ciénaga railway workshops near Havana with the intention of transporting 700 soldiers to protect and repair the railway, initially between Havana and Santa Clara. The story behind this incident is a good example of the manner of involvement of revolutionary workers in the final stages of the insurrection, when they concentrated on propaganda, sabotage and aid to the guerrillas, rather than localised industrial action. The workers in the railway yard had considered refusing to work on the train, but following a meeting with the regional organiser of the July 26th underground, they decided to continue working, albeit slowly, while keeping the rebels informed of the progress and nature of their work. This gave them an opportunity to engage in propaganda work amongst the already demoralised

⁷⁴⁸ Padrón & Betancourt, *Batista: últimas días en el poder* (2008) pp.234-236 [my translation]

soldiers who were to man the train and who were billeted in the works. This bore fruit and, before the train left on December 23rd, 39 soldiers deserted, aided by the railway workers who provided them with civilian clothing. Many more left the expedition on route, which arrived in Santa Clara with barely half its original complement. The train was finally derailed outside Santa Clara on the 30th during the final stages of the battle for that city (see Figure 38). At this point, most of the soldiers deserted to the rebels, leaving the officers and remaining soldiers little choice but to surrender. The rebel army gained a considerable amount of supplies, arms and ammunition from the ruined train.⁷⁴⁹

The battle for Santa Clara also illustrates the confusing way that labour movement activity is described in much of the literature. In his biography of Che Guevara, John Lee Anderson informs us that Guevara was in contact with trade unionists in Santa Clara while preparing the assault.⁷⁵⁰ He neither tells us who they were nor gives us an idea of their politics or trades. The question of whether they were *mujalistas* attempting to save their skins or, alternatively, communist and M-26-7 militants, whether working together or separately, is not considered. This would not only be interesting for our study, it would also shed light on the development of Che's politics, which is directly relevant to Anderson's book. In the event, there are surviving documents that clarify the situation and it is clear that there was a functioning joint committee in Santa Clara composed of the local CDDO and M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, the former based mainly among the *gastronómicos* (hotel, restaurant and catering workers), the latter among the bank workers. By the time the city fell, the *mujalistas* had already been purged, the local union offices seized and the *gastronómicos* had taken charge of the provision of supplies for the civilian population and the rebel troops.⁷⁵¹ Previous chapters have dealt at length with the activity of the *mujalista* trade union bureaucracy and the role they played in sustaining the dictatorship. However, by the middle of 1958, they had become irrelevant to both sides. Corruption and open support for Batista had so undermined their influence that they were of little further use to the regime. As Cuban politics became completely polarised between supporters of Batista and the rebels, an organisation that relied for its existence on its ability to balance between capital and

⁷⁴⁹ Barquín, *Las luchas guerrilleras* (1975) p.61

Padrón & Betancourt, *Batista: últimos días en el poder* (2008) p.128, 134

Guevara, *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* (2001) p. 263 [Guevara gives the date of the derailment as the 30th December although other writers speak of the 28th]

⁷⁵⁰ Anderson, *Che Guevara* (1997) p.354

⁷⁵¹ IHC 1/8:13/36.1/1-2, Comité de Unidad Obrera de Las Villas, "ACTA" (1958)

IHC 1/8:13/36.1/3 - Comité de Unidad Obrera de Las Villas, "A Los Trabajadores" (1958)

labour was swept aside. On New Year's Day 1959, Cuba awoke to the news that Batista had fled, but so marginalised had Mujal himself become that Batista did not bother to inform the CTC general secretary, who had to hurriedly seek refuge in the Argentine embassy.

The rebel army had driven the dictator from office, but it had not yet succeeded in seizing power or changing the political or economic system. The US embassy was holding emergency talks with those generals who had not fled in an attempt to find an officer, untainted by connection with the previous regime, who could lead a military coup to forestall a complete rebel victory. The columns led by Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos were swiftly deployed to Havana, but were not sufficiently strong by themselves to overcome the enemy forces in the capital. There was a real possibility that an army coup, particularly if it was led by an honourable patriotic officer without previous close association with Batista, could have split some of the middle class support away from the M-26-7 and prolonged the civil war.⁷⁵² Such an intervention was greatly feared at the time, as can be seen by Lazaro Peña, communist ex-secretary of the CTC, writing of his concerns the previous November.⁷⁵³ As the rebels moved in to seize Santiago on New Year's Morning, Fidel Castro spoke over the radio from Santiago to condemn the coup attempts and to call for a revolutionary general strike. This call was directed at all workers in territory not yet liberated and told them to follow the lead of the *Sección Obrera del Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio*, to seize all union offices and to organise in all workplaces to totally paralyse the country.⁷⁵⁴ From the moment the call went out, the strike was complete. Such a strike does not take long to describe; suffice to say that everything stopped and the scale of the action is evident from contemporary photographs, such as those of Bert Glinn (Figure 39).

This strike is practically ignored in the literature, which concentrates on the more romantic and colourful actions of the rebel army. Even Julia Sweig and Ramón Bonachea, despite paying considerably more attention to the urban underground than most authors, only accord the strike a couple of lines each, while Hugh Thomas

⁷⁵² Karol, *Guerrillas in power* (1970) pp.167-168

⁷⁵³ Peña, *Cuban Workers and People Resist Batista's Brutal Dictatorship* (1958) p.18

⁷⁵⁴ "Alocución del Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro, por Radio Rebelde, el 1ro. de enero de 1959" cited in Bell, Lara et al., *Documentos de la Revolución cubana 1959* (2006) pp.11-14

mentions it only in passing.⁷⁵⁵ It is discussed at slightly greater length by Samuel Farber who argues:

*The general strike called by Castro after Batista's overthrow was almost superfluous. In fact the completely successful 1959 strike was called to ensure the consolidation of the new revolutionary regime and was aimed at no one in particular, because Batista and his cohorts had already fled the country, and no one else dared challenge Castro.*⁷⁵⁶



Figure 39: January 1959 from Glinn, *Havana* (2001)

This evaluation is completely contradicted by Fidel Castro himself, who affirms that the general strike was decisive in delivering the fortresses of the capital of the Republic, in defeating the final manoeuvres of the enemies of the people and in giving all power to the revolution.⁷⁵⁷ Farber's dismissal of the strike's importance begs a question. In the light of the author's view of the revolution as a personal seizure of power by Castro, why would he call the strike if he was already in control and thereby risk stirring up popular demands for power that could menace what Farber refers to as his "revolutionary Bonapartism"?⁷⁵⁸ It is a more logical proposition to argue that the rebel army had driven Batista to flee and created a situation where a general strike was possible, but it was that general strike itself that ensured the "Triumph of the Revolution".

⁷⁵⁵ Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection* (1974) p.322
Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) p.179
Thomas, *The Cuban Revolution* (1986) p.248

⁷⁵⁶ Farber, *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba* (1976) p.202

⁷⁵⁷ Castro, *Discursos del comandante Fidel Castro* (1959) p.8

⁷⁵⁸ Farber, *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba* (1976) p.197

The strike provided such powerful evidence of the overwhelming popularity of the rebel victory that the army chiefs quickly abandoned their plans for a military coup. Furthermore, the strike gave an authority to and freed personnel for the M-26-7 militias that were keeping order in the streets of Havana for that first week in January, thereby preventing the scenes of violent disorder and lynch mob rule that had followed the downfall of Machado.⁷⁵⁹ Another important aspect of the general strike was the way in which it placed the M-26-7 in complete control. The popular reaction to Fidel Castro's triumphant passage from Santiago to Havana demonstrated quite clearly who was the new power in the land. Equally significant was the way in which Castro was able to call for a return to work when he arrived in Havana, thereby demonstrating his authority once and for all.

Conclusion

Following the failure of the attempted general strike on April 9th 1958, the prospects of the revolutionary opposition must have seemed very bleak indeed, yet within a year, the regime had been overthrown and the rebels were in complete control of the country. The decisions taken at Altos de Mompié, to give priority to the guerrilla struggle and to work with the communist party in the labour movement, had born fruit.

The success of the rebel army in repulsing the government's "Summer Offensive" heartened everyone who was opposed to Batista and established the July 26th movement as the most important component of the opposition. Within the labour movement, this new prestige was reflected in increasing support for the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*. The centre of gravity within the labour movement had now decisively shifted to the rebel side. This chapter contains virtually no reference to Mujal and, in truth, he had become irrelevant. In the early days of the dictatorship his control of the CTC had provided important cover for Batista. As late as April 1958, he had provided valuable service to the regime in undermining the rebels' attempted general strike, but by the end of 1958, he was so discredited that he was a positive liability. The ability of the rebels to organise large scale workers' congresses in territory under their control marked the final transfer of working class legitimacy from Mujal to the rebels. Everywhere they had the opportunity, aided by the rebel army, ordinary workers quickly removed Mujal's appointees. Where they could not, they simply ignored them. The April 9th failed strike had proved that workers were reluctant to take action when faced with security forces

⁷⁵⁹ Hart-Phillips, *Cuba* (1959) pp.38-43

that were prepared to use deadly violence to maintain order. The situation changed so dramatically over the summer that, by the autumn, there seemed little point in taking industrial action for narrow economic ends when the prize of a new political order suddenly appeared within reach. This enhanced standing of the M-26-7 within the working class made an alliance with them more attractive to the communist party, who adopted a position of uncritical support for the rebel army and its tactical approach based on the armed struggle.

What therefore is the balance sheet of communist involvement in the Cuban insurrection? The main accusation of their enemies is that the PSP only jumped on the rebel bandwagon when victory was assured.⁷⁶⁰ This ignores the fact that, when the PSP first publicly announced its support for the guerrilla war, in March 1958, rebel victory was far from a foregone conclusion. It also ignores the work of ordinary rank and file communists, who risked their lives distributing a constant stream of leaflets and underground newspapers, which contributed to maintaining and building a level of working class discontent that responded so overwhelmingly to Fidel Castro's call for a general strike in January 1959. It is true that the communists did not make a great contribution to the guerrilla struggle, but that was never their area of strength or expertise. The communist party's main influence was in the working class movement and it was this that they offered when negotiating with Fidel Castro. The course of those negotiations are shrouded in mystery as both parties played their cards close to the chest, while Castro had the added difficulty of trying to get the PSP into the alliance without alienating his more anti-communist supporters. It is also true that, after they decided to support the guerrilla campaign, the PSP were much keener on reaching an agreement than was the M-26-7, who correctly recognised the relatively small contribution the communists could make to the advance of the rebel army which was their main area of interest.

Nevertheless, the PSP did contribute a considerable amount to the growth of the revolutionary working class movement, in particular by helping to organise the two labour congresses in Las Villas and in the Sierra Cristal. The difficulties encountered in organising such meetings have been widely underestimated. A workers' conference with 600 in attendance, which is organised in opposition to the official trade union

⁷⁶⁰ This position is perhaps best articulated in Sims, *Cuban Labor and the Communist Party* (1985). For a more balanced view see: Farber, *The Cuban Communists in the Early Stages of the Cuban Revolution* (1983) pp.59-83 or Massón Sena, *Proyectos y accionar del Partido Socialista Popular* (2009)

bureaucracy, would be significant at any time, to do it in the middle of a civil war, with many of the delegates coming from areas still under government control, is really quite impressive. One of the principal themes of these congresses was the *Huelga General Revolucionaria*, the revolutionary general strike. This final general strike was instrumental in preventing the projected coup and elevated the M-26-7 to a position of hegemony. Without this strike, it is unlikely that the rebel victory would have been either so swift or so complete. Such general strikes do not materialise out of thin air, they have to be organised. As has been argued in the case of the strike which started in Santiago at the funeral of Frank País, apparent spontaneity in fact requires considerable prior organisation combined with a readiness to profit from a rapidly changing situation.

Two of the main arguments in this chapter, that the PSP made a significant contribution to the rebel victory and that the general strike of January 1959 played a vital role in the final victory of the revolutionary forces, run contrary to the majority historiographical view. The other theme of this chapter has been the convergence of the politics and tactics of the PSP and the M-26-7. This had been accompanied by the start of the organisational convergence of their work in the labour movement in the form of the FONU. This new-found unity was to prove very fragile.

Chapter 8. The First Year of the New Cuba

With the overthrow of the Batista regime a new chapter in Cuban history began. However, the early period of the revolutionary government was deeply affected by the means by which it came to power. This chapter will therefore examine the changes which occurred in the world of organised labour over first year of the new regime. In particular it will examine the way in which the recently established alliance between the July 26th movement and the communist party did not survive the arrival of the rebels in Havana, as well as providing an explanation of this rupture. Given that the two organisations eventually merged, we shall consider the realignment of forces within the M-26-7, in particular discussing the contradictions between a new CTC bureaucracy and revolutionary elements who wished to move the revolution in a more radical direction. The future Cuban Communist Party would emerge from the victory of the radicals in this faction fight, this is yet another example of the way in which an analysis of the social role of the trade union bureaucracy can aid our understanding of the working class role in history.

Division

As soon as it was known that Batista had fled, David Salvador was appointed the new general secretary of the CTC, an action which marked the end of the united front with the communist party. During the January 1959 strike, the FONU called for a mass meeting in the *Parque Central* in Havana on the 2nd January 1959 and another on the 8th to support the revolutionary government. This last appeal, signed by José Maria de la Aguilera for the M-26-7 and Carlos Fernandez Rodriguez for the CNDDO is the last statement issued in the name of the FONU as a joint body, although Octavio Louit was still using the title *Secretario de Organización del FONU* in an interview on the 17th January.⁷⁶¹ Meanwhile, Níco Torres and Conrado Béquer, the latter still in his olive green uniform as a *comandante* of the Rebel Army, flew directly from Santiago to Havana where they supervised the seizure of the CTC headquarters. This they did in the name of the *Sección Obrera* of the M-26-7, whose leaders took all the seats on the CTC provisional executive committee, with David Salvador as secretary general (Figure 40).⁷⁶² The PSP were completely shut out and, on the 13th January, the CNDDO wrote a

⁷⁶¹ IHC 1/8:15/1.2/1-2, FONU, "*Llamamento del FONU*" (January 1959)
IHC 1/8:15/1.2/1-2, FONU, "*Manifiesto a la Clase Obrera*" (January 1959)
Revolución (January 17th 1959)

⁷⁶² *Bohemia* (January 11th 1959) p.102

furious letter to David Salvador complaining that Torres and Béquier had told them that the FONU was now dissolved and excluding them from decision making and even from entering the building.⁷⁶³ Receiving no reply, the CNDDO, this time invoking the name of Lazaro Peña, called for a demonstration on the 21st only to be outflanked by David Salvador, who called a demonstration on the same day demanding justice for the 600 workers victimised by the *Compañía Cubana de Electricidad* and to celebrate the end of the compulsory check-off of union dues that the government had decreed on the 20th.⁷⁶⁴



Figure 40: Provisional CTC Executive, from *Bohemia* (January 1959)

With the establishment of the revolutionary government in Havana, the centre of attention moved to the capital and it was here that sentiment in the July 26th Movement was most hostile to working with the PSP. The journals *Bohemia* and *Revolución* became the mouthpieces for this approach, with frequent articles attacking communism in general and the Cuban communists in particular.⁷⁶⁵ In a long interview published in

Cueto, *El 26 de Julio en la dirección sindical* (1959) pp.50-51

⁷⁶³ IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/104-6, CNDDO, "Carta a David Salvador" (January 13th 1959)

⁷⁶⁴ IHC 1/8:13A1/1.1/107, CNDDO, "Llamamiento a Concurrir" (January 18th 1959) *Revolución* (January 21st 1959)

Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba, no. 8, (January 23rd)1959.

⁷⁶⁵ eg. Pares, *Estrategia Comunista en la Revolución Cubana* (1959) "Fuera del FONU los comunistas" *Revolución* (January 26th 1959)

Bohemia in February 1959, David Salvador argues that the FONU was a good idea, but the efforts spent trying to build it were a waste of time, that the communists were not a significant factor in the labour movement and that only the M-26-7 had any real implantation in the working class; a sentiment which has had considerable influence on the established historiography.⁷⁶⁶ The new leadership of the CTC set up the *Frente Humanista* (Humanist Front) and using this name succeeded in winning the overwhelming majority of the union elections.⁷⁶⁷ Whatever Fidel Castro's personal views on relations with the communists may have been, and he was careful not to be too specific, his first priority was to keep his own organisation together. Thus, when a group of angry communist railway workers knocked on the door of his apartment to denounce what they saw as undemocratic behaviour by David Salvador, he listened politely, expressed his interest, but did not pursue the matter further.⁷⁶⁸

As part of the attempt to reassure the more right wing elements of the M-26-7 and to confuse the US government, the early "Revolutionary Government" was headed by a former judge, known for his honesty and his opposition to corruption rather than his radicalism, and many of the new ministers were equally moderate. The appointment of David Salvador, whose personal hostility to the PSP was well known, was the implementation of this strategy within the labour movement.

Bureaucracy

A galloping bureaucratisation of the CTC took place in the first months of 1959; many of the new officials quickly made themselves comfortable and began to resent the constant mobilisations and calls for action. They gravitated towards David Salvador and his associates in the anti-communist wing of the M-26-7, who started to use crude anti-communism to attack those who wanted to push the revolution to take more radical steps. The more radical elements became known as the "*unitario*" group within the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, among whose most prominent members were those who had been involved in the Las Villas congress: Jesús Soto, Lila León and José Maria de la Aguilera. These *unitarios* soon attracted others in the CTC leadership, mainly those with long term clandestine revolutionary experience such as Níco Torres and Octavio Louit, who were disturbed by the growing bureaucratisation. Seeking allies, they found

⁷⁶⁶ "Entrevista", *Bohemia* (February 15th 1959) n/pag.

⁷⁶⁷ "Victoria Democrática en el Campo Obrero", *Bohemia* (September 27th 1959) p.67

⁷⁶⁸ *Hoy* (January 31st 1959)

them in the PSP, who both agreed with the need to push the revolution further and who resented being excluded from the leadership of the labour movement.

The basis of the orthodox communist political approach was the theoretical position that history moved in stages and that it was first necessary to complete the "bourgeois democratic" phase of the revolution before moving to socialism. The Cuban revolution was therefore defined as being "popular, patriotic, democratic, agrarian and for national liberation".⁷⁶⁹ In line with this analysis, the leadership group of the PSP around Blas Roca were content to engage in the revolutionary process as it unfolded and, in particular to support the wing of the M-26-7 that seemed most progressive. This was also the section of the leadership that was most sympathetic to their inclusion, primarily those around Raúl Castro and Che Guevara, who condemned sectarianism and spoke publicly for unity of all revolutionary forces including the PSP.⁷⁷⁰ They continued working with those M-26-7 trade unionists who had wished to carry on the united approach implied by the FONU.

What was the reaction of the rank and file workers to this? The first demands to be raised were for the reinstatement of those workers victimised for their militancy or made redundant as part of the old regime's productivity drive. There was particular joy at the reinstatement of those bank workers sacked for their strike in 1955 and the 100 bus workers dismissed after the coup in 1952.⁷⁷¹ Then there were wage claims, 10 or 20 percent, sometimes enforced by short strikes, more often just won by the threat of action. Some Shell refinery workers managed to double their wages.⁷⁷² Throughout 1959, the CTC was the main mobilising force of the revolution and all of the major demonstrations were called in its name. Mayday 1959 saw a million workers on the march, while hundreds of thousands went on strike and demonstrated on the streets to protest at the October airborne attack launched by right-wing exiles from Miami.⁷⁷³ During the government crisis of July 1959, workers' protests and a strike on the 26th July were important factors in enabling Fidel Castro to remove Manuel Urrutia from the Presidency and to secure the post of Prime Minister for himself. Thus, we see a growing

⁷⁶⁹ IHC 10-126/2/62-92, PSP, "*La Revolución cubana, su carácter, sus fuerzas y sus enemigos*" (May 1959) cited in Rojas, *El Primer Partido Comunista de Cuba, vol.3* (2011) p.265

⁷⁷⁰ "Charla del Comandante Ernesto Che Guevara", cited in Bell Lara et al., *Documentos de la Revolución cubana 1959* (2006) p.34

⁷⁷¹ *Revolución* (February 14th 1959)

⁷⁷² *Revolución* (February 7th 1959)

⁷⁷³ *Revolución* (October 23rd 1959)

rift between the increasing radicalism amongst ordinary workers contrasting with a tendency to bureaucratisation amongst a section of the CTC officialdom.

Within the CTC, matters came to a head at the 10th Congress of the CTC held in Havana in November 1959. The delegates were 90% 26th July, but were deeply split between the anti-communist faction lead by David Salvador and the *unitarios* fronted by Soto and Aguilera. Conrado Béquer, who chaired proceedings had some difficulty in maintaining order. Fidel Castro opened the proceedings and spoke of the need for unity. Both sides interpreted this to suit their own entrenched position and matters were no nearer a resolution as the closing session approached. Castro returned, upbraided the delegates for their uncomradely behaviour and it was agreed that a committee composed of Fidel Castro, David Salvador, Conrado Béquer, José Pellon and Jesús Soto should compose a compromise list for the executive. The posts were divided between the two factions with, an anti-communist deputy to a *unitario* executive officer, or vice-versa in most positions. Two notable absences are Béquer and Torres, now leaders of the FNTA and the railway federation respectively. This list was carried by acclaim, with the communist delegates abstaining, and the congress ended in relative harmony.⁷⁷⁴

Che Guevara called the tenth congress "an arduous war against the representatives of *mujalismo*, representative of the old CTC gang".⁷⁷⁵ Modern Cuban writing tends to adopt this line, although this was not the case at the time, even in the heated atmosphere of the congress hall, with neither of the newspapers of the PSP and M-26-7, *Hoy* nor *Revolución*, using the term *mujalista*.⁷⁷⁶ On the other hand, anti-Castro writers such as Robert Alexander and Efrén Córdova discuss the 10th congress of the CTC entirely at the level of the bureaucracy itself and see the fight as being between honest officials who respect private property and what Alexander refers to as "Melons", green on the outside, red on the inside. The eventual triumph of the *unitarios* is seen as an imposition by Castro as part of his plot with the communists.⁷⁷⁷ Neither of these explanations are satisfactory. In January 1959, the CTC bureaucracy was effectively purged both *de jure* and *de facto*. Mujal himself had sought refuge in the Argentine embassy, from where he was allowed to leave for Miami. The rest of his bureaucratic apparatus were removed from office and were well enough known by the ordinary membership to have no

⁷⁷⁴ "El X Congreso Obrero" *Bohemia* (November 29th 1959) pp.59-62&78-9
Revolución (November 23rd 1959)

⁷⁷⁵ O'Connor, *The Origins of Socialism in Cuba* (1970) p.193

⁷⁷⁶ eg. Bell Lara et al. , *Documentos de la Revolución cubana 1959* (2006) pp.23-24&324

⁷⁷⁷ Alexander, *A History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002) pp.198-203

Córdova, *Clase Trabajadora y Movimiento Sindical en Cuba* (1959-1996) (1996) pp.67-78

chance of regaining their positions. However, many of those who took their place quickly adopted bureaucratic attitudes and started using some of the old *mujalista* techniques such as voting irregularities and anti-communist demagoguery. In a manner commonly found amongst opportunist trade union bureaucrats, they resented the work implied by constant mass mobilisation. Aquilera and Louit were particularly vocal in criticising this trend. The right wing of the bureaucracy, in return, used the accusation of growing communist influence to attack those who wanted a more radical approach to running the economy. Thus, one can say that they adopted similar bureaucratic methods to the *mujalistas*, but we have to be clear that they did not represent the return to office of the old *mujalista* bureaucrats themselves.

David Salvador himself did not last long as general secretary. Events outside the union forced the pace of change and 1960 was a year in which, following the obvious popularity of the agrarian reform programme of the previous year, there were large scale nationalisations of foreign-owned enterprises. These, if the size of the demonstrations in their support are anything to go by, were very popular and this radical economic approach, combined with the hostile reaction from the US, seemed to launch a new wave of popular nationalism amongst the working class. The more radical political circumstances, combined with the threat of US intervention, pushed the balance inside the CTC in the direction of the *unitarios*. David Salvador disappeared from view almost immediately after the 10th congress and for the rest of 1960, the most prominent CTC spokesman was Conrado Béquer, with Jesús Soto and Octavio Louit also much in evidence. David Salvador resigned in February 1960 and in June joined the "30th November Movement", which was linked to the right-wing guerrillas operating in the Escambray mountains. He was arrested in November of that year, expelled from the CTC and charged with treason. The victory over the US supported invasion at Playa Girón in April 1961 sealed the dominance of the *unitarios* within the CTC and in July 1961 Lázaro Peña, the communist tobacco worker who had been ousted in 1948, assumed leadership of the federation. A final word about Níco Torres, who has played such an important part in this story. He remained as leader of the railway workers federation, played a part in the early contacts with the USSR, visiting Moscow in 1960 and, on his retirement, became an active member of the National History Commission. He died in Havana in 1991 at the age of 79.⁷⁷⁸

⁷⁷⁸ Figueras, *Semblanza de Antonio Torres Chedebaux* (n/d)

Conclusion

How can we account for this sudden about face from the apparently genuine attempt to build a united front in the labour movement? Firstly, it is in the nature of united fronts which have a limited goal that they fall apart in the face of the political differences of the participants when that goal has been achieved. The goal of the FONU had been the overthrow of the dictatorship; when that had been achieved, many in the M-26-7 saw no further use for the alliance with PSP. The July 26th Movement had a hegemonic view of revolution; they sought unity under their unchallenged leadership. On the other hand, in colonies or countries considered to be "semi-colonial", like Cuba, orthodox communist policy called for an alliance between the working class and the progressive, patriotic bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie with the aim of achieving full national independence. It is easy to see how an alliance with the M-26-7 could be seen to fit this model. The PSP therefore consistently called "*for a broad coalition government of all democratic forces*", which was not at all what the M-26-7 leadership had in mind. Both Conrado Béquer and David Salvador pointed out that the old communist party newspaper, *Hoy*, had been permitted to resume publication without censorship and that democratic elections would be held in the not too distant future. The implication was that the PSP should be thankful for this and stop complaining. Furthermore, it was not only the PSP who were excluded, the *Directorio Revolucionario* fared no better; its leader, Faure Chaumón, was denied a platform at the first Mayday celebrations on the grounds that there was not enough time.⁷⁷⁹

Secondly, the July 26th Movement was itself a coalition of different class interests and political opinions, united by a hatred of the dictatorship, but with very different ideas about the future direction of the revolution. There was a clear division within the movement between a right and left wing, with many of the better off supporters of the movement being opposed to the communists for fear that they might represent a challenge to their economic and property interests. Amongst this faction, the use of the expression "growing communist influence" became a stick with which to beat the more radical sections of the 26th July movement.

Thirdly, there was a very real fear of US intervention and the feeling that, if the US government felt that the revolution was under communist influence, they would be more likely to intervene. It was considered prudent therefore to distance the leadership

⁷⁷⁹ "Desfile" *Bohemia* (May 10th 1959) p.102

from an association with the PSP. The M-26-7 trade union cadres' use of crude anti-communism during the the trade union elections which took place throughout the early part of 1959 helped to buy time for the revolutionary regime. The British and US governments were unsure, but on balance thought that Castro was not influenced by Communists; he was considered to be an "extremist", but they were not sure of what type.⁷⁸⁰

So, why did the M-26-7 subsequently split and its left wing realign with the communist party? Revolutions never stand still. The increasing radicalisation of the revolution alienated many of the middle and upper classes who wished that change could have stopped with the removal of Batista and who stood to lose money from the reductions in rent and utility charges, as well as fearing the effects on business profits from workers' wage increases. This was reflected inside the M-26-7 and the Revolutionary Government, but also had repercussions in the labour movement.



Figure 41: Telephone workers support state intervention from Bohemia (March 13th 1959)

Fidel Castro worked with the more radical elements of the M-26-7 to move the CTC to the left. In part, this was done by using his both his undoubted popularity and considerable political manoeuvring skills to secure leadership positions for his supporters amongst the new trade union leaders. The outcome of the elections at the 10th Congress of the CTC is a good example of this.⁷⁸¹ The purges of the rightist elements from the bureaucracy in 1960 aroused no particular outcry from the rank and file membership, but to merely describe these officials as "the old CTC gang" is inaccurate, as the old *mujalistas* had already been comprehensively removed in early 1959. I

would argue that more convincing explanation can be found in the nature of trade union bureaucracy.

The trade union bureaucracy is an inherently conservative force which balances between capital and labour, gaining privileges and a certain independence in the process. Moreover, the CTC under Eusebio Mujal was also thoroughly corrupt and completely undemocratic. However, removing the abuse and corruption did not deal with the essential nature of trade union bureaucracy; that required a political

⁷⁸⁰ FO 371/148178 - AK1011/1 *Annual report for 1959* (January 1960)

⁷⁸¹ FO 371/148342 - AK2181/1 *Labour - Trade Unions* (December 1959)

understanding. In the second half of 1959, the national leadership of the revolution were grappling with the problems they faced in attempting to take hold of a state structure that had developed to serve the interests of capitalism; a situation further complicated by the domination of the economy by foreign, mainly US, capital. It was becoming obvious that merely correcting the abuses of the Batista regime was not enough, if Cuban society was to change, the core nature of the state had to change as well. This battle was reflected in the CTC and fought out at the tenth congress.



Figure 42: Rally in support of nationalisations from *Bohemia* (August 14th 1960)

There was considerable popular support for the revolutionary government as the state took increasing command of the economy. Nationalisation of foreign owned enterprises had long been a popular demand in the Cuban labour movement and the large turnouts for the demonstrations in support of the nationalisations in 1960 would seem to indicate the widespread popularity of these moves (Figures 41 & 42).⁷⁸² The CTC was one of the prime movers in these demonstrations and the ascendancy of the left following the 10th Congress was a significant factor in providing an institutional vehicle for the expression of this support.

⁷⁸² U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1290 (Dec. 18, 1950) *Cuban labor leader suggests nationalization of American-owned Electric and Telephone Companies*

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1384 (Jan. 3, 1951) *Progress reported in nationalization of Autobuses Modernos S.A.*

U.S. Embassy Havana, Despatch 1178 (Jan. 18, 1952) *Weeka No. 3; Railway union threatens general strike if government does not nationalise United Railway*

FO 371/139488 (1959) *Expropriation of British property in Cuba*

"Sucedió el 7 de agosto de 1960" *Bohemia* (August 14th 1960)

Just as the revolutionaries found that they could not achieve their ends by merely taking over the old state machine, so revolutionary workers' leaders found that they could not just take over the old CTC structure. Revolutionary change of both the state and the unions was necessary if they wanted to revolutionise society as a whole.

Findings and Conclusions

The untold history of working class involvement in the Cuban insurrection of the 1950s emerges from the archives as a fascinating story of courage and organisation. Recovering from the defeat of an important series of industrial battles in 1955, a small but determined group of workers managed to build a clandestine labour movement in the face of an entrenched trade union bureaucracy and a brutal military dictatorship. This movement refused to accept the logic of capitalist industrial relations, which relates workers' demands on the employers' ability to pay. They organised unofficial strikes, produced a lively underground press and combined industrial action with sabotage and armed conflict, thereby providing valuable support for the rebel guerrillas. By the end of 1958, they were able to organise two revolutionary workers' congresses composed of hundreds of delegates and, finally, the most complete general strike in Cuban history.

Given such an impressive record, one wonders why this story is "untold", particularly as the evidence is available in the archives for any researcher who cares to look. Perhaps it is because so much historical writing prefers to concentrate on the actions of "great men" and is blind to the ability of ordinary workers to take an independent and often decisive collective role in the development of events. In attempting to bring this hidden history to light and to provide an answer to the question "What was the role of organised labour in the Cuban insurrection?", several subsidiary questions arose. In answering these, a fuller picture of the actual role played by the workers emerges.

What were the problems facing Cuban workers during the 1950s?

There was a profound contradiction at the heart of the Cuban economy: the national income, principally derived from the export of sugar, which provided 80% of the country's exports, was insufficient to maintain the wage rates and staffing levels historically expected by the workers while, at the same time, providing the profit margins the employers expected. In order to maintain their profits, business interests needed to increase productivity, which they sought to do by cutting wages, decreasing staffing levels and introducing new machinery. Such a re-division of the national income in favour of capital at the expense of labour did not prove possible under a democratic regime. This caused significant sectors of Cuban and US business to support

the authoritarian solution offered by Fulgencio Batista, in the expectation that an authoritarian regime would break workers' resistance to the implementation of cost cutting measures.

The Batista government supported and co-ordinated an offensive by the main groups of employers aimed at reducing wage costs, having first secured the support of the trade union leadership by corruptly advancing the personal interests of the bureaucracy. This productivity drive was conducted sector by sector, ensuring that no two significant groups of workers came under attack at the same time, thereby undermining the possibility of generalised resistance. This process was aided by the trade union bureaucracy, who played a moderating and conservative role. Whenever there was a danger of groups of workers bypassing the limits set by the bureaucracy, the government used repressive force to defeat them. This dual strategy of repression and corruption, which was employed throughout 1955, succeeded in defeating workers in the railway, banking, textiles and brewing industries as well as, most importantly, the sugar workers. The tobacco workers and the dockers, however, managed to resist the increased mechanisation of their industries. As a result of the defeats of 1955, important sections of the Cuban working class adopted other methods of organisation and struggle to defend their interests.

How was the Cuban working class organised?

The trade union bureaucracy under capitalism is predominantly a conservative social group, with interests independent of the workers they purport to represent. This results in a tendency to accommodate to the *status quo*. This conservative self-interest made the trade union officials around Mujal susceptible to the offers of corruption coming from the regime. Up to 1955, the CTC bureaucracy had appeared to defend wages and conditions and had largely maintained its hegemonic position. However, in the face of the concerted employers' offensive, which started in earnest that year, it revealed itself as unable or unwilling to safeguard working class living standards and was increasingly seen as part of the problem rather than contributing to a solution.

The term "organised labour" can be used to describe working class organisation at a number of levels. There are the formal structures of the trade unions and then there are a multiplicity of unofficial, informal structures through which ordinary workers defend their interests, often in the face of obstruction from the official bureaucracy. The role

played by the *mujalistas* in undermining working class resistance has led to an underestimation of the role played by workers in the insurrection. However when the division of interest between the bureaucracy and the rank and file is taken into account, the way is opened to search for evidence of involvement by workers that is distinct from the conventional view obtained by merely considering official union activity.

Thus, the categorisation of the general strikes of August 1957 and January 1959 as "spontaneous" is an example of the tendency for historians to see an event as spontaneous when in reality they just do not know, or do not wish to admit, who actually organised it. This use of the idea of "spontaneity" to dismiss events for which an author has no explanation, ignores and dismisses grass-roots organisation. These two strikes, as well as a large amount of other militant working class activity, were the work of the network of activists linked to the rebel movement. This organisation, which was started by revolutionary militants from Guantánamo, drew on pre-existing unofficial relationships within the labour movement and spread westwards to cover much of the island. As well as organising strikes and demonstrations, these activists engaged in sabotage and provided logistical support for the guerrillas. This network was organised in some areas on the basis of a formal cell structure, in others less formally. These activists sometimes collaborated with communist party members and supporters, according to local circumstances, traditions and personal relationships. Sometimes this network operated under the name of the *Frente Obrero Nacional*, sometimes under the name of a local committee of workers unity or some such, and sometimes was completely anonymous. Whatever form this network took in the localities, it proved very effective in organising material and political support for the rebels in the hills, as well as localised industrial action. The most significant achievement, however, was that these activists provided the basis for Fidel Castro to call the most complete general strike in Cuban history in January 1959.

What political forces were active in working class politics ?

It can be confusing to refer to the "labour movement" as if it were a single entity, as there were clearly a variety of different movements operating within the working class in Cuba during the period under consideration. It may be more helpful to refer to "poles of political attraction" within the wider context of organised labour. There were three such poles of attraction within the broad labour movement: the communist *Partido Socialista Popular*, the *Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio* led by Fidel

Castro and the trade union bureaucracy led by Eusebio Mujal. From 1955 onwards, the main question in working class political life was the competition for support between the PSP, the M-26-7 and the official union machine.

The *mujalista* trade union bureaucracy started to lose credibility after the defeats of 1955 and became increasingly dependent on state intervention to maintain its position. There were some splits in the union leadership which took two forms: on the one hand internal jealousies and arguments over the division of the spoils of corruption and, on the other hand, honest officials who opposed what they saw as a sell-out of workers' interests. The latter group, small in number but significant in their effectiveness, moved towards the M-26-7. By the end of 1958, Mujal and his associates were effectively marginalised.

The PSP found its main support in those industries that were able, for various reasons, to resist the employers' offensive of 1955-56 and defend their conditions of employment, principally the docks, tobacco and hotel and catering. In these industries, the communist line of "Mass Struggle" still appeared to provide a way forward. However, in those industrial sectors which suffered defeat in the class battles of 1954-1955, particularly railways, banking, textiles and sugar, small but growing nuclei of local workers' leaders turned to a more radical policy. They became convinced that the only way that workers could reclaim their rights and regain democratic control over their trade unions was by the revolutionary overthrow of the regime. These militant workers were attracted to the armed struggle approach advocated by the July 26th Movement. Of particular importance were a group of railway workers from Guantánamo, in the extreme east of the island, who developed a tactical approach which they called *sindicalismo beligerante*, combining traditional industrial action, such as strikes, go-slows and demonstrations, with sabotage, bombing and other armed actions. This dovetailed with the M-26-7's revolutionary approach, which relied on a general strike supported by guerrilla action to overthrow the dictatorship. The fact that these workers adopted revolutionary tactics did not affect their basic demands, which were reformist in the sense that they sought improvements within capitalism rather than its overthrow.

What was the relationship between the PSP and the M-26-7?

The growth of the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, inevitably brought them into contact with PSP militants at workplace level. The dynamics of workplace organisation forced

these two groups of militants to interact and, while there was continued political debate and disagreement, a process of convergence started to occur, which was considerably in advance of the developing relationship at leadership level. The two organisations had much in common politically, both advocating an egalitarian nationalist solution to the social and economic crisis, assuming the necessity of a cross-class alliance and seeing the revolutionary process as one that progressed by stages. Neither grouping openly advocated socialism. Their differences were largely tactical, with the PSP promoting unarmed mass struggle, while the M-26-7 saw the need for armed action to defeat the forces of state repression. Both organisations placed the general strike at the centre of their approach, but they had a very different conception of the tactic. To the PSP it represented a traditional stoppage of work by the overwhelming majority of workers, who would thereby achieve their objective by sheer weight of numbers and by paralysing the economy. To the M-26-7, the general strike was more akin to a mass armed popular insurrection. As opposition to the Batista regime grew, the difference between these tactical approaches was tested in practice. The PSP leadership learnt the need for armed support, while the M-26-7 leadership realised that popular support could not just be summoned, but had to be built by relating to workers' economic and social interests.

The process of tactical convergence began first at workplace level, as local solidarity pushed militants from both organisations to work together. This convergence was boosted by the increasing brutality of the regime, particularly in the east. As the army and police became frustrated by their inability to defeat the guerrillas, they vented their feelings on the civilian population. In addition to this random unofficial violence, there was increased activity by government death squads which targeted all sections of the opposition, but made a particular target of known working class activists, including communists, despite their opposition to the armed struggle. The sheer horror of the state violence meted out by the Batista dictatorship has dropped from sight in recent studies, but it needs to be remembered as an important factor contributing to the increasing popular hatred of the regime. The common danger was another factor in pushing rank and file communists and *fidelistas* together as well as producing a feeling amongst many ordinary PSP supporters that they needed to arm themselves, if only in self defence.

While there was a political convergence between the two organisations, the process of organisational convergence was slower, in part due to anti-communist attitudes within sections of the M-26-7, particularly in Havana. However, anti-communism takes different forms and there are both right-wing and left-wing varieties, with the former being opposed to the communists because of opposition to the collectivisation of property, while the latter frequently feel that the communists are insufficiently militant and overly bureaucratic, with a poor commitment to democracy. It is important to differentiate between these two phenomena, as left-wing critics of the communist party were frequently prepared to collaborate with communist militants once these adopted a more radical approach, while the right wing were generally resolutely opposed in all circumstances. The leading members of the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, with the notable exception of David Salvador, fell into the left-wing category and, following the PSP acceptance of armed action, did work with the communists.

A view of the Cuban revolution which sees the rebel victory as entirely the work of the guerrilla army will necessarily see little contribution from the communists. If the role of organised labour is taken into account, the communist contribution becomes considerably more significant, as this is the area in which they operated most effectively. Thus, their systematic agitation and propaganda was a key factor in helping maintain independent working class organisation, while their organisational experience and pre-existing militant networks complemented the work of the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*.

To what extent were regional differences important?

In all of this, there was a regional dimension and opposition to the regime was generally stronger in the east of the island and least pronounced in Havana. The arrival of the nucleus of the rebel army in the *Granma* gave the advocates of *sindicalismo beligerante* their first test. There were strikes and sabotage in Guantánamo in solidarity with the armed actions in Santiago in November 1956. This drew the attention of leadership of the M-26-7 to the contribution that could be made by organised labour and the Guantánamo workers were encouraged to spread their organisation and activities. Relationships between the M-26-7 and the PSP were also better in the east of the island and, in a parallel move, the local communist leadership in Santiago supported the M-26-7 armed actions of November 1956 by organising a dock strike in solidarity. This

aided the process of convergence between the two organisations, which was slow and uneven, but was most pronounced amongst workers in the east and centre of the island.

Moreover, the importance and influence of working class members of the M-26-7 was greater in Oriente, Matanzas and Las Villas provinces, while the leadership of the urban underground in Havana tended to be drawn more from professional and petty bourgeois backgrounds. Partly as a result of this, there was a better relationship between the M-26-7 and the PSP in the provinces than in the capital for, as previously stated, workplace solidarity and the pressure of unaligned workmates tends to lessen sectarian party differences. Another factor in considering regional differences was that the influence of the trade union bureaucracy diminished away from the capital, where the head offices of the federations were situated. On the other hand, government capital expenditure was concentrated in Havana, with such projects as the Havana Bay Tunnel providing employment, while the tourist industry and its associated hotel building programme were also concentrated here and in nearby Varadero. As a result, there was less economic pressure on workers in the capital and therefore less reason to seek a revolutionary solution. Recognition of these regional differences is crucial to understanding the course of the insurrection.

How significant was the involvement of organised labour in determining the outcome of the conflict?

As the crisis deepened, the army and police engaged in a campaign of terror, including the use of death squads and torture, which was particularly fierce in Oriente province. Militant workers, even when unconnected to the rebels, were a particular target of this state repression. The initial working class response to state terror comprised a series of strikes in Manzanillo, Bayamo and Santiago. These, while helping to raise levels of opposition to the regime, proved ineffective in preventing government violence, with the result that many workers, including sections of the communist party, were drawn to support the rebel forces. Even the August 1957 strike, despite being the biggest demonstration against Batista before he fled, did not seriously threaten the regime. In circumstances where a regime is prepared to use high levels of brutality to suppress workers' attempts to defend their wages and conditions, then conventional methods of mass action, such as the strike, the demonstration, the boycott etc., are insufficient. Equally, armed guerrilla action without mass support normally leads to

isolation and defeat. The victory of the revolutionary forces in Cuba in 1959 was due to a successful combination of these tactics.

The failure of the regime's summer offensive of 1958 gave the rebel forces immense prestige and resulted in the loss of support for Batista from within the business class. The subsequent rebel advances led Batista to flee the country but, while this removed the dictator, it did not ensure the victory of the revolutionary forces. Rather, the general strike called by Fidel Castro at the beginning of January 1959, was crucial in preventing an army coup that would have prolonged the war. This general strike was in no way spontaneous, but was the result of careful preparation. The FONU was responsible for convening two well-attended workers' congresses in rebel held territory in December 1958. These congresses agreed to organise a general strike at the start of the next sugar harvest, due to begin in the following January. However, Batista fled before this and the general strike had to be brought forward to prevent a military coup designed to prevent a rebel victory. This strike was the most complete in Cuban history and ensured the overthrow of the old regime. The importance of this in determining the future course of events cannot be underestimated.

How can the Cuban Revolution be characterised?

In common with many conflict situations, there were a number of struggles taking place in parallel and most combatants participated in some elements but not others, according to their political beliefs and class interests. The insurrection was a civil war, a class struggle, an anti-imperialist movement, a democratic revolution, a fight for national independence against neocolonialism, a campaign against corruption and an episode in the Cold War. However, in the period between 1952 and the end of 1958, there was no faction or interest group publicly arguing for socialism. Many supporters of the revolution from petty bourgeois, professional and managerial social strata were concerned with democracy and anti-corruption, as well as being sickened by the regime's brutality, but had an economic interest in the productivity measures enforced by the government. Those big business elements who came to support the revolution, switching their allegiance from their previous support for Batista and his productivity drive, did so because they felt that matters could not continue as they were and any solution which promised a return to stability on any terms was an improvement over the prevailing chaos. To this may be added that there would have been personal reasons for many, reacting against the repressive violence which left few families untouched. These

pro-capitalist sectors would have had little interest in the anti-imperialist and Cold War aspects of the conflict, although many outside the sugar oligarchy may have been attracted to economic nationalist arguments, while they were mainly hostile to increased workers' rights.

The workers who supported the rebel cause did so on a number of levels. As citizens they were party to the general revulsion with corruption and a desire for the return of democracy. In working class politics, this was reflected in demand for the cleansing of the trade unions and the right to elect their chosen leaders. This was not an abstract demand, but linked to re-establishing the CTC as a vehicle to defend wages, jobs and workplace rights and it was thus inextricably linked with the class struggle. The publicly expressed demands of the rebel workers' movement were, in themselves, reformist and related to a return to earlier, higher wage and staffing levels. However, while there was nothing intrinsically incompatible with capitalism in the workers' demands, these demands were not affordable for Cuban capitalism in the light of its position in the world capitalist economic order. International competition meant that they were effectively pricing themselves out of a market which was able to tour the world seeking the lowest wage costs. This contradiction would lead to working class support for anti-capitalist measures following the rebel victory.

Finally, can the insurrection be considered to be a workers' revolution? I would conclude that, in the period 1952-1959, working class involvement in the insurrectionary process took place as part of a cross-class alliance, within which specifically working class forms of struggle made a vital contribution to the success of the rebellion. Without this contribution from organised labour, the insurrection might have failed, but this does not make it a workers' revolution.

What contribution does this research make to the historiography of the Cuban Revolution?

Very little has been written on working class responses to authoritarian and repressive regimes and even less that describes a successful outcome from the workers' point of view. In the case of Cuba in the 1950s, organised workers were able to defy their corrupt official leaders and form an alliance with armed guerrillas in such a way that they made an important contribution to the overthrow of an authoritarian regime which used repressive violence in an attempt to increase labour productivity in a time of economic crisis. The examination of this self-organised activity, which has been largely

overlooked in the literature, sheds light on the relationship between working class identity and the class struggle, showing the role of revolutionary nationalist politics in overcoming divisions based on race and trade. The addition of an analysis of the role of the trade union bureaucracy adds a further dimension to the more common explanations of the role of organised labour by going a step beyond mere considerations of class treason or corruption.

While women only made up 10% of the Cuban workforce and many of those were in the notoriously difficult organisational territory of domestic service, the comparatively few trade unionised women workers in the Cuba of the 1950s played a vital role in initiating and sustaining militant action out of all proportion to their numbers. There is still much work to be done in this area and it is my intention to undertake further archival research in this under-explored area.

I believe this to be the first systematic examination of the available primary sources that originate in the Cuban clandestine organised labour movement of the 1950s. The history which has come to light as a result of my research paints a very different picture from the standard historiography. It does not underestimate the well known achievements of the rebel army, but rather offers an explanation of the way in which these guerrillas interacted with a mass-based revolutionary working class organisation. This interaction, I have argued, was essential for the victory of the rebel movement and the overthrow of Batista. In the process of this investigation, the buried history of an impressive revolutionary working class organisation has emerged, the contribution to the Cuban revolution made by working class women has been given greater significance and the role of the communist party reassessed. There is much more work to be done, but I hope that this thesis has made a significant contribution to the demystification of the revolutionary process.

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