

Working Class Militancy and the Downfall of Batista: the relationship between mass action and the armed struggle in Cuba 1952-59

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Introduction

The working class plays a vital role in classical Marxist theory. It is therefore surprising, given that Marxism is a major tenet of the official ideology of the Cuban state, that the actual role played by workers in the insurrectionary phase of the Cuban revolution has received such little attention by historians living outside Cuba itself. This investigation will examine the involvement of Cuban workers in the history of the 1950s and assess the extent to which the working class can be seen to have acted as *a class for itself*¹ when confronted with the violence and corruption that was endemic in Cuba at the time.

The Cuban revolution has been widely seen as emerging from a rural guerrilla struggle, although Julia Sweig's recent study of the urban underground has started to redress the balance². However, the *Movimiento Revolucionario 26 de Julio* (M-26-7), which organised that guerrilla struggle, placed the general strike at the very centre of its approach to overthrowing the Batista dictatorship. The strike is the classic political and industrial weapon of the working class and therefore an investigation of the relationship between the M-26-7 and striking workers is essential if we are to get a rounded picture of the Cuban revolution.

There were four major politically significant strikes in the 1950s, the sugar workers strike of 1955-6, the Santiago strike of August 1957, the attempted general strike of April 1958 and the final general strike of January 1959. These will be examined for the effect they had on the development of the revolutionary process as well as the way in which they affected the relationship between the two main oppositional parties that had built or retained a base in the working class by the end of the 1950s: the M-26-7 and the communist *Partido Socialista Popular* (PSP). Both of these organisations based their tactics for bringing down the Batista government on the general strike, but had a very different idea of the nature of such a strike and the role of the armed struggle in its execution. We shall see how these four strikes helped bring about a tactical convergence between the two organisations.

Aside from Jean Stubbs³, few of those writing in English on the Cuban revolution have a background in labour history and many do not seem to understand the dynamics of militant

¹ Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1900) Chapter 2.2

² Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002)

³ Stubbs, *Tobacco on the Periphery* (1985)

industrial action. There has equally been a tendency to think that the trade unions are synonymous with the labour movement in a way that does not take account of the complexity and multilayered nature of working class industrial and political organisation. In addition to the formal, bureaucratically organised trade union, it is necessary to consider the activities of shop stewards, dissident officials, strike committees, regional committees, mass meetings, the *Secciones Obreras* of the different parties and unofficial networks of militants, all of which make up the wider labour movement and interact together to produce the dynamic of industrial action. Because the official trade unions were under the control of supporters of the dictatorship, it has been common to downplay working class participation in the insurrection, in part because, outside of the recorded minutes of formal meetings, it is difficult to deduce the collective decision making processes of ordinary workers. It is difficult, but not impossible and there is extensive archive material available. There is an added problem that, given the extreme polarisation of opinion on the nature of the present Cuban state, many writers on the period have as much interest in proving a modern-day political point as they have in establishing historical truth, another reason why there is a greater need than usual to check as much as possible against primary sources.

The *Instituto de Historia de Cuba* (IHC) has an extensive archival collection of leaflets, pamphlets, newspapers and magazines from the period which they generously made available to me. By reading the propaganda material issued by the various factions, it is possible to gauge the politics of the audience for which it was intended, while the detail or lack of it in a party newspaper can tell us a great deal about the involvement of that party's militants in a particular struggle. We are also fortunate that the *En Cuba* section of the weekly news magazine *Bohemia*, when not subject to censorship, gave extensive and detailed coverage to workers disputes and to the debates current in the working class movement of the period. The first issues of *Bohemia* following the flight of Batista also contained many reports and photographs which they had not been permitted to print previously and, in the following years, it published a number of interviews with participants in the events under consideration. These sources are complemented by an oral history project, conducted amongst surviving veterans of the insurrection, which has been reported by

Gladys García Pérez⁴. Following an examination of such primary and contemporaneous sources, the involvement of organised workers in the events of the insurrectionary phase of the Cuban revolution will be re-examined and their contribution to that insurrection reassessed.

To become concrete, this discussion needs to be located in the collective behaviour of Cuban workers in the 1950s and will be approached by adopting a framework based on Robin Blackburn's assertion that, if there are real, effective and deep-seated structures in economic and political life, such structures will be visible at the level of events⁵. Therefore, following an analysis on the nature of the Cuban working class of the period, each of the four strike movements referred to above will be considered and their place in the more widely known and debated events of the period will be established. This re-examination indicates that organised workers played a greater role in the downfall of Batista than most writers admit, but, because of the predominance of nationalist politics within the labour movement, they played this role as part of a multi-class alliance, seeking reformist solutions to their problems while supporting revolutionary methods to bring about change.

Nearly everyone writing on the subject approaches it from the point of view of the personalities involved and concentrates on the activities of the guerrillas in the mountains. Thus, for instance, Mike Gonzalez reduces the contribution of the labour movement to a mere six line footnote⁶. Matters, indeed, have not greatly improved since Andres Suarez, writing on the state of the research in 1972, complained that "*nothing significant exists on the labor movement from 1952 to 1958*"⁷. There is however an alternative approach that looks at the events from bottom up, seeing class-conscious workers as the subject of history rather than its object. Such an approach will be adopted with a view to reassessing the extent of the involvement of the organised working class in the Cuban revolutionary process.

⁴ Kapcia, *Review*, (2001) pp.182-183

⁵ Blackburn, *Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (1988) p.28

⁶ Gonzalez, *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution* (2004) p.179

⁷ Suarez, *The Cuban Revolution* (1972) p.13.

Chapter 1 - The Cuban Working Class

Frederick Engels, in a footnote to the 1888 English edition of the Communist Manifesto, defined 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"⁸.

This class has an importance in classical Marxist theory as it is considered to be the class with the potential to change the economic and political basis of society and bring about a socialist transformation. Some writers see this as a Eurocentric view and question whether it has any relevance to Cuba in the 1950s, given the fragmentation of the working class and the high levels of unemployment and underemployment that destabilised the relationship between individuals and the means of production⁹.

In a capitalist economy, workers co-operate during the production process in factories, mines, offices and fields and this co-operation is reflected in the manner in which workers collectively fight for their interests through trade unions. If we define workers by their relationship with the means of production, then their political importance needs to be considered in terms of that relationship. Let us take the example of sugar workers, the most economically important and numerous group of workers in Cuba. As work in the sugar industry is seasonal, then so is the political importance of its workforce: their organisation and activity will reflect the harvest cycle. In order to survive, cane cutters engage in a variety of economic activities outside the sugar industry during the "dead season", but these activities do not directly concern our enquiry as their political activities during that dead season will not be the collective actions of sugar workers, even if their interests and opinions are strongly affected by their work at harvest time.

Cuban sugar workers had a militant history and, in addition to forming the most important Cuban trade union, they had set up soviets and armed militias during their 1933 strike¹⁰. The seasonal nature of their employment militated against bureaucratically stable trade union organisation, with membership numbers fluctuating widely according to the time of year, but this saved them from the dangers of conservatism that are inherent in traditional skilled trade unionism. Thus, for example, sugar workers had a tradition of cane burning sabotage as a tactic for enforcing

⁸ Marx & Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1971) p.48

⁹ Whitney, *History or Teleology?* (2001) p.231

¹⁰ Carr, *Mill Occupations and Soviets* (1996) p.141

their demands. However, the fragmenting effects of the seasonal harvest cycle were offset by the fact that most of them lived in communities in which they formed the overwhelming majority, thereby reinforcing workplace solidarity with community feeling in times of industrial struggle. We shall see the strength of this solidarity when considering the 1955 sugar workers' strike. In many ways, despite the apparent dissimilarity, the sugar workers tradition of struggle and vital place in the national economy gave them a similar leading position in the life of the Cuban labour movement that mineworkers occupied in Europe. 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 that economic link was reflected in a tradition of solidarity and mutual support as Oscar Zanetti and Alejandro García show in their study¹¹.

If everyone accepts the proletarian nature of railway workers, bank workers present some writers with 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 clerks¹². However if we use Engels's definition quoted above, there is no such problem as bank workers sell their labour power in the same manner as train drivers and are therefore equally proletarian, merely being more skilled and better paid. This was quite clear to the Havana bank workers in 1955 who went on unofficial strike 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 inappropriate¹³. In common with the railway and sugar workers already discussed and alongside other groups such as textile workers, they showed a collectivist response to their problems that, when politically necessary, managed to overcome the fragmentation caused by the nature of the Cuban economy¹⁴.

The Cuban economy was totally subordinated to the interests of the sugar industry which had been dominated by large US corporations since Spanish colonial days¹⁵. While, by the 1950s,

¹¹ Zanetti & García, *Sugar and Railroads* (1998)

¹² Smith, *The Shape of the Working Class* (2007)

¹³ *Bohemia* (18th September 1955) p.75

¹⁴ García-Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution* (1998) p.42-50

¹⁵ Pérez-Stable, *Cuban Revolution* (1999) pp.8

there had been an increase in Cuban ownership, there had been a parallel process of integration of the Cuban bourgeoisie into US capitalism¹⁶. The ruling class in these circumstances was very small. However, despite the extreme division of wealth, a middle class did exist and they felt resentful at being excluded from power. Many of them, particularly the students, felt that their prospects would be improved by an economy run in the interests of local industry¹⁷. This nationalist middle class required a mass base to advance such policies and, given Cuba's gross economic inequality, that programme had to address the region's social problems if it was to attract support from the impoverished peasants and workers. This gave Cuban nationalism its particular nature as a mass popular movement.

In the 1950s, the *Asociación Nacional de Industrialistas Cubanos* (ANIC), which campaigned for protectionism, against corruption and against foreign domination of the economy, was loudly calling for economic nationalist policies to develop local industry, arguing that this would increase prosperity and employment prospects. This argument attracted considerable working class support and gave many workers the feeling that they had a common interest with such patriotic industrialists, while seeing the sugar oligarchy as tools of US imperialism and as traitors to the nation.

There had certainly been a reduction in anti-imperialist feeling since the 1930s with the removal of the open affront caused by the Platt amendment and the subsequent move to a more subtle form of economic domination by US capital. Indeed there had developed a fashion for US cultural products and consumer goods amongst those who could afford it¹⁸. 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 sentiments¹⁹. He does not, however, specifically consider the attitudes of working class people, who often bore the brunt of US economic domination. Statements by popular and respected workers' leaders such as textile worker Julián Alemán²⁰ or sugar worker Conrado Rodríguez²¹, which were widely reported in the

¹⁶ Blackburn, *Prologue to Revolution* (1963) p.60-61

¹⁷ Harman, *Return of the National Question* (1992) p.12

¹⁸ Pérez, *Cuba and the United States* (1990) p.208

¹⁹ Farber, *Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006) p.179

²⁰ Del-Cueto, *En la Rayona* (1954) pp.54-5

²¹ Rodríguez, *La industrial azucarera ha obtenido fabulosas ganancias* (1955) p.71

press of the time, exhibit a belief that foreign domination of the economy was responsible for their level of exploitation and their lack of job security. Charles Page comments:

"For years, the Cuban workers' bloodiest strikes were against the intransigence of certain American enterprises"²².

Regional variations in attitude are also often neglected. US investment in both sugar and railways was concentrated in the eastern end of the island and it is in this area that we find both the highest levels of working class militancy accompanied by significant anti-imperialist sentiment²³. Therefore, when considering the attitudes about the USA that were common in the working class at the time, particularly among the more militant and class-conscious, Maurice Zeitlin is probably nearer the mark in saying:

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 corporations²⁴

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

In the 1950s, Cuba may have had the highest average per capita income in Latin America, but that statistic only serves to disguise the degree of inequality and the chronically high level of unemployment²⁵. In defining a worker by his or her relationship with the means of production, the unemployed will not be included when considering specifically working class political activity. However, the presence of such a large "reserve army of the unemployed" deeply affected the consciousness of those in work and at times produced fear of dismissal while at others it produced militancy in defence of job security. There has been a tendency for some historians to consider the Cuban working class to be "non-political" but it is more accurate to see workers as being focused on their own specific interests. Job security was always the prime concern and most judged the performance of political parties and trade unions on their response to this issue. Thus, the blatant corruption of the *Auténticos*, the party that ruled Cuba through the late 40s, was not of great moment to most workers, so long as the government did not challenge the employment rights gained in the late 30s and early 40s. Their main parliamentary challengers, the *Ortodoxos*, had

²² Page, *Development of Organized Labor in Cuba* (1952) p.167

²³ Zanetti & García, *Sugar and Railroads* (1998) p.208

²⁴ Zeitlin, *Revolutionary politics and the Cuban working class* (1967) p.288

²⁵ Pérez, *Cuba* (2006) pp.224-230

nothing to say of direct relevance to organised labour and therefore had little influence in the trade unions, aside from a few respected individuals.

By the mid-1940s, Cuba had the highest percentage of trade unionised workers in Latin America²⁶, but the main federation, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC) had become completely bureaucratised and dependent upon its relationship with the government, with most disputes settled by the intervention of the Ministry of Labour rather than by collective bargaining. The CTC bureaucracy, headed by general secretary Eusebio Mujal, was completely corrupt and had gained its position through a mixture of gangster violence and government patronage²⁷. Thereafter, they used Mujal's links to government to secure enough economic gains for their members to maintain their position. Originally an *Auténtico*, Mujal and the majority of his faction, the *Comisión Obrera Nacional Auténtica* (CONA), swiftly changed sides after the 1952 coup and became Batista's loyal collaborators²⁸. In return for this collaboration, the government gave the *mujalistas* generous bribes and obliged employers to deduct trade union subscriptions from workers' wages by means of a compulsory check-off. However, despite the *mujalista* bureaucracy's best efforts, the CTC was not a monolithic organisation and, as well as some honest, independent trade union leaders, the communists still had a level of influence. This was particularly true in the countryside where social legislation was not well enforced and, given that most urban bureaucrats avoided the rural areas, militants, including PSP members, managed to gain a following²⁹.

The PSP 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 socialism³⁰. During the early 1930s, the Cuban Communists attempted a sectarian implementation of this policy and refused to work with other organisations³¹. 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 movement³². It was, however, taken by surprise when, in 1933, a Havana

²⁶ Sims, *Cuba* (1992) p.217

²⁷ Stubbs, *Tabaco en la periferia* (1989) pp.161-164

²⁸ Spalding, *Organized Labor in Latin America* (1977) pp.227-238

²⁹ O'Connor, *The Origins of Socialism in Cuba* (1970) p.181

³⁰ Aguilar, *Marxism in Latin America* (1968) p.28

³¹ Whitney, *State and revolution in Cuba*, (2001) pp.93-4

³² Carr, *Mill Occupations and Soviets* (1996) p.130

bus drivers' strike turned into a revolutionary general strike and the PSP tried to settle the strike in return for concessions from the government. When the strike continued despite the PSP and successfully brought down the Machado government, the communists sacrificed much of their credibility.

The Comintern, concerned by the lack of progress made during the early thirties and concerned by the growth of fascism, changed course and adopted the policy of calling for *Popular Fronts*, alliances between the working class and *progressive elements* in the bourgeoisie. Communist Parties internationally began to speak in terms of national unity against fascism and imperialism, while minimizing the significance of the class struggle³³. The particular interpretation of the popular front policy that was adopted in Cuba resulted in an alliance with Batista in the 1940s, memory of which further reduced the party's credibility amongst Batista's opponents under his second dictatorship in the 50s.

The PSP, having realised that it could not renew its earlier alliance with Batista, had quickly moved into opposition, urging workers to organise a general strike to bring down the government. However, in common with the other Communist Parties of Latin America, it did not support armed action, calling instead for the setting up of a *Frente Democrático Nacional* to unite the whole opposition in a popular front to resist Batista using legal means³⁴. Unfortunately for them, most of the rest of the opposition was as anti-Communist as it was anti-Batista and the call fell on deaf ears. Having been falsely accused of complicity in the 1953 Moncada attack, the PSP was included in the generally increased repression, despite condemning the M-26-7 as adventurist. Their newspaper *Hoy* was closed down and the remaining Communists were purged from the CTC³⁵. It took the PSP some time to adjust to the new situation, but by 1955 they had looked back to their roots and were working to rebuild their working class base.

However, with their adoption of the rhetoric of national unity, accompanied by a turn to reformism, the Cuban Communist Party ceased to act as a revolutionary socialist organisation and their "bread and butter" approach to trade unionism did not offer a socialist alternative to challenge

³³ Farber, *Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006) pp.141-2

³⁴ Karol, *Guerrillas in power* (1970) p.129

³⁵ PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano* (1985) pp.274-6

the hegemonic nationalist politics. As a result they had to be content with tailing other, more militant nationalist currents³⁶.

One such grouping was the M-26-7 whose 1956 programme³⁷ speaks of democracy, social justice and economic independence. Fidel Castro's speech, "History will absolve me", is a powerful condemnation of the poverty and oppression caused by the economic and social policies of the Batista regime³⁸. The M-26-7's tactics for the revolutionary overthrow of Batista centred on a general strike; where they differed most markedly from the PSP was in stressing the need to combine that strike with an armed insurrection³⁹. 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, peasants, the unemployed, small businessmen and professionals along with patriotic industrialists. At the end of 1955 therefore, the communists still had considerable influence in the trade unions while the M-26-7 had yet to build a working class base. The sugar workers' strike of that year was, however, to cause a massive realignment of the political situation within the Cuban labour movement.

³⁶ Aguilar, *Marxism in Latin America* (1968) p.28

³⁷ Bonachea & Valdés, *Cuba in revolution* (1972) pp.113-40

³⁸ Castro, *History Will Absolve Me*, (1975)

³⁹ García-Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution* (1998) p.72

Chapter 2 - December 1955 Sugar Workers Strike

Historians outside Cuba, with the notable exception of Marrifeli Pérez-Stable⁴⁰, tend to treat the 1955 sugar workers' strike as an incident of passing importance, normally characterising it, if they mention it at all, as an economic issue that is only noteworthy for the involvement of the *Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* (FEU) and as being without long term significance⁴¹. This was certainly not the Cuban attitude at the time, with Bohemia saying that it had "*gone further than a simple workers' economic struggle into a widespread popular movement*"⁴², while modern Cuban historians accord it considerable importance⁴³.

Before the start of each year's sugar harvest, it had been the agreement to pay the workers a bonus, known as the *diferencial*, based on the price that the sugar actually achieved on the market. In 1955, however, the government restricted the harvest and kept 350,000 tons in reserve, thus permitting the employers to dishonestly calculate the price at a lower rate and deny the bonus. The government, with CTC support, refused to negotiate, while the *mujalista* leadership of the *Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Azucareros* (FNTA) denounced the workers' demands as unreasonable. Undeterred, starting in Las Villas province, but soon spreading nationwide, 500,000 sugar workers went on strike at the end of December and the CTC bureaucracy, unable to stop the action, placed themselves at its head and settled the strike at the earliest opportunity⁴⁴. Faced with what they thought was a sell-out, the PSP called for the continuation of the strike but without success⁴⁵.

It is a mistake to see all of the CTC bureaucracy as corrupt supporters of the government; two of the strike leaders, Conrado Rodríguez and Conrado Bécquer, opposed the sell-out in a blistering attack on Mujal in the press⁴⁶ and both were expelled from the union along with many of their supporters⁴⁷. This purge of the FNTA followed a similar intervention in the *Sindicato Bancario de la Habana* at the end of the bank workers strike that took place earlier that same year⁴⁸, thereby confirming that Mujal would not tolerate any opposition to his control of the trade unions or his

⁴⁰ Pérez-Stable, *Cuban Revolution* (1999) pp.54-6

⁴¹ Bonachea & San Martín, *Cuban Insurrection* (1974) pp.56-60

⁴² Lorenzo-Fuentes, *Huelga azucarera* (1956) pp.62-3,88

⁴³ Interview with Rojas-Blaquier (2007)

⁴⁴ Rojas-Blaquier, *1955*, (1998) pp.68-76

⁴⁵ Peña, *General Strike Wins Workers 6½ Million Dollars* (1956) p.18

⁴⁶ Bequer-Díaz, Conrado, *Mujal ha vendido las demandas azucareras* (1956) p.61

⁴⁷ Del-Cueto, *El pleito sindical de los trabajadores azucareros* (1956) p.144

⁴⁸ *Bohemia* (18th September 1955) p.75

support for Batista. The polarisation between Batista's supporters and the M-26-7, which was developing in every sector of Cuban life, equally affected the trade unions and the previously existing middle ground was disappearing. Bécquer followed the purged leader of the bank workers, José Maria de la Aguilera, into the M-26-7 and both went on to become leaders of its *Sección Obrera*⁴⁹.

It was not only the leadership of the FNTA that was politically affected by the strike. The response of the police and army showed ordinary workers that the privileges accorded by the regime to Mujal and his associates did not extend to them. Faced with a level of repression only previously used to attack militant students, the sugar workers themselves turned to violence and set up road blocks, burnt cane fields and occupied town halls and city centres: actions that resulted in hundreds arrested or wounded, with several strikers being killed⁵⁰. This confrontation destroyed many illusions and convinced a significant minority of workers that there was no longer any reformist solution to their problems⁵¹. The irrelevance of the *Ortodoxos* and the few remaining honest *Auténticos* was clearly demonstrated and most working class members of these organisations either moved to supporting the M-26-7 or drifted into political obscurity.

The violence used by the state against the strikers produced a bond of solidarity between sugar workers and students as they realised they had a common enemy. Students had been the only sector of society to actively oppose the 1952 coup and their opposition, as well as the consequent repression, had grown with the election of the revolutionary nationalist José Antonio Echeverría as leader of the FEU. Police violence against the students came to a head on 7th December 1955 with an attack on a demonstration⁵² and the FEU called for solidarity from workers to be shown by a five minute general strike on the 14th. Despite virulent CTC opposition, this short demonstration was very well supported, particularly in Havana, Santiago and Matanzas, and indicated a growing disillusion with both the official unions and the regime. At the same time, it helped to raise political tensions and increased the self-confidence of the sugar workers. The FEU repaid this solidarity by sending student organisers out into the sugar fields to help the strikers. After Mujal, aided by José Luis Martínez, head of the FNTA, had finally sold out the strike, the FEU

⁴⁹ *Bohemia* (11th January 1959) p.102

⁵⁰ García-Oliveres, *José Antonio Echeverría* (1979) p.258

⁵¹ Pérez-Stable, *Cuban Revolution* (1999) p.55

⁵² *Bohemia* (11th December 1955) p.124-5

helped Bécquer, Rodriguez and other dissident FNTA leaders in their unsuccessful attempt to create a rival organisation⁵³. The support that they showed in the sugar strike gave the FEU and its offshoot the *Directorio Revolucionario* (DR) enormous credibility amongst workers and the revolutionary nationalist politics of the student activists gained a greater working class following. The DR itself was unable to break out of the student milieu and so did not profit organisationally from the strike. They did, however, politically prepare the ground for the M-26-7.

There was a general upturn in the class struggle in 1955, with railway strikes in addition to the actions of the bank and sugar workers⁵⁴. Furthermore, Mujal had recently reached agreement with the government on a modification of the dismissal regulations which made it much easier for employers to discharge workers and, in so doing, the CTC bureaucracy lost a great deal of support from its membership for whom job security was a high priority. It therefore proved a propitious moment for a new approach and the PSP's decision to set up *Comités de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras* proved successful enough to be able to organise a national conference in February 1956 and to set up the *Comité Nacional de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras y por la Democratización de la CTC* (CNDDO)⁵⁵. Their intervention in the sugar workers' dispute appears to have been quite successful; leaflets issued in the name of the *Comité en Defensa de los Demandas de la Zafra de 1955*⁵⁶ and the detailed local strike reports in the party's clandestine bulletin, *Carta Semanal*⁵⁷, indicate widespread party involvement in the action. 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 wider sections of the community⁵⁸. This encouraged the party leadership to believe that their general political orientation was correct and their sectarian criticisms of Becquer and Rodriguez⁵⁹ ensured that relationships with the emerging *Sección Obrera* of the M-26-7 got off to a bad start.

The change in attitude of many trade unionists which came out of the sugar workers' strike equally helped the M-26-7 with recruitment amongst disillusioned workers. The role of the FEU in

⁵³ *Bohemia* (22nd January 1956) pp.sup11-13

⁵⁴ García-Pérez, *Insurrection and Revolution* (1998) p.38

⁵⁵ PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano* (1985) p.286

⁵⁶ *Trabajadores ¡Alerta!* (1955) *Instituto de Historia de Cuba* (IHC) archives Box:1/8:13A1

⁵⁷ *Carta Semanal* (11th January 1956) pp.3-6

⁵⁸ Valdespino, *Mas allá del diferencial* (1956) pp.55&81

⁵⁹ *Carta Semanal* (18th January 1956) p.3

reinforcing revolutionary nationalist politics has already been discussed, but they were in no position to profit from it because the DR had only just been formed and, although the FEU's influence was hegemonic in the university, its membership was restricted to students. For those who wished to oppose the regime but who did not trust the PSP or thought they were too moderate, the M-26-7 was the logical choice, not only amongst sugar workers but in other industrial sectors as well.

For a long time there had existed a militant network amongst the railway-workers of Oriente province under the leadership of Antonio (Ñico) Torres and Octavio Louit Venzant⁶⁰. This grouping had led the *Hermandad Ferroviaria delegación 11* in Guantanamo in opposition to the CTC bureaucracy ever since organising an unofficial strike in 1943 in contravention of the wartime no-strike policy⁶¹. They successfully called action in solidarity with the sugar workers and in September 56 joined the M-26-7. After instigating a five day political strike in Guantanamo to support the Granma landing, Ñico Torres and Octavio Louit quickly rose into the national leadership⁶².

In terms of the relationship between militant workers and the M-26-7 therefore, it may be argued that the class struggle in 1955 was a crucial turning point. Up to that moment, *Mujalismo* had, while suppressing their political aspirations, defended workers' wages and conditions adequately enough to neutralise organised labour and isolate militant activists. The CTC bureaucracy's shameless support of Batista, despite the increasing involvement of the police in industrial relations, while at the same time abandoning their defence of the all-important dismissal regulations, undermined the CTC's credibility and thereby allowed the M-26-7 to gain influence and important new recruits, particularly in Las Villas and Oriente.

⁶⁰ Tennant, *Hidden Pearl of the Caribbean* (2000) pp.177-8

⁶¹ Zanetti & García, *Sugar and Railroads* (1998) p.364

⁶² García-Pérez, *Insurrection and revolution* (1998) p.34

Chapter 3 - August 1957 Oriente Province

The Province of Oriente had a reputation for militancy and rebellion going back to the Ten Years War⁶³ and this was particularly true in the mid 50s, when the area was a stronghold for the M-26-7. This was, in part, the reason for Castro choosing the east of the island for the Granma landing. Santiago contributed some exceptional leaders, including Frank País and Vilma Espín Guillos, while past struggles had created a spirit of solidarity amongst militants of different political persuasions. Workers in Havana had seen greater benefits from the relationship between Mujal and Batista than those who lived in the provinces and it was therefore easier for the CTC bureaucracy to exercise its control over union activity in the capital⁶⁴. So we can see both objective and subjective reasons for the greater militancy in the east. Looking from very different viewpoints, both Julia Sweig⁶⁵ and Angelina Rojas⁶⁶ agree that Oriente was the one area in Cuba where a cordial relationship and a level of co-operation existed between the PSP and the M-26-7.

In 1957, Frank País, the M-26-7 national co-ordinator of action, was based in Santiago from where he was working both to promote the movement's clandestine operations and to organise support for the guerrillas in the nearby Sierra Maestra mountains. His murder at the end of July 1957 by a local police chief produced a general strike in Oriente, which was probably the biggest public demonstration of opposition during the entire Batista dictatorship. These events are generally ignored in the literature, with even the normally highly detailed Ramón Bonachea⁶⁷ 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. Only Julia Sweig⁶⁸ deals with it in any detail. This neglect is particularly hard to understand, given the importance that the general strike played in the tactics of the M-26-7.

Wherever the August 57 strike is mentioned, it is characterised as "spontaneous" and herein probably lies the root of the lack of importance it is accorded, as spontaneity is confused with lack of organisation and political direction. Interviews with militants involved in the strike, however, paint a different picture of the course of events. Miguel Angel Yero, an activist in the M-

⁶³ *Bohemia* (18th September 1955) p.77

⁶⁴ Spalding, *The Workers' Struggle* (1974) p.7

⁶⁵ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.17-18

⁶⁶ Interview with Rojas-Blaquier (2007)

⁶⁷ Bonachea & San Martín, *Cuban insurrection*, (1974) p.146

⁶⁸ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.46-9

M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, describes how he and his comrades went to Frank País's funeral with the idea of initiating some action, if at all possible, and, seeing a large turnout combined with the fact that very many *Santiagueros* shared their anger, they started to shout for a strike. The call was taken up and the 60,000 people at the funeral marched through the town, calling workers out of their factories, offices and shops until the town was paralysed in a strike that lasted 5 days⁶⁹. An established clandestine network of M-26-7, PSP and independent militants operated in Oriente which was able to spread the strike to the rest of the province, including a shutdown of the railway network⁷⁰. However, Octavio Louit, who left Santiago to co-ordinate action in the centre of the island, maintains that, while there was support amongst the workers of Camagüey and Las Villas for the strike, state repression prevented its extension to other regions⁷¹. Efforts to launch a strike in Havana on August 5th were unsuccessful outside of a few traditionally militant sectors such as public transport, due in part to some swift action by the *mujalista* bureaucracy⁷².

These events had a profound impact on the leadership of the M-26-7, but were badly misinterpreted and this lack of understanding would lead to the failure of the strike in April 1958. The leadership of the M-26-7, while committed to the overthrow of Batista by a general strike backed up by armed action, had very little concept of the dynamics of workers' struggles and no experience of the labour movement. The activity of the *Sección Obrero* outside of Oriente was based upon sabotage and raising financial support for the guerrillas rather than on organising for mass action. The M-26-7's revolutionary nationalist politics prevented them from having a class based analysis of the situation as they were working to create an alliance of patriotic, honest democrats irrespective of class. This naturally affected their view of how to organise a strike and who they expected to take part⁷³. A feature of the August strike in Santiago was the way in which the shopkeepers had shut their shops for the duration, many in solidarity or from disgust at police behaviour, while the remainder wanted to protect their front windows. This evidence of support from elements in the business community impressed the M-26-7 clandestine leadership and caused them to direct their plans for the organisation of the general strike towards the *Movimiento*

⁶⁹ Torres-Hernandez, *Huelga de Agosto* (1977) p.5

⁷⁰ Zanetti & García, *Sugar and Railroads* (1998) p.394

⁷¹ Torres-Hernandez, *Huelga de Agosto* (1977) p.6

⁷² PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano* (1985) pp.333-4

⁷³ Internal M-26-7 circular (1957) in Hart, *Aldabonazo*, (2004) p.205-212

Resistencia Cívica, an organisation of middle-class and professional people associated with the M-26-7, rather than the newly formed *Frente Obrero Nacional* (FON), an extension of the M-26-7 *Sección Obrero*⁷⁴. The appointment of David Salvador⁷⁵, a Havana-based, sectarian anti-communist with little previous trade union experience, to lead the FON rather than any of the more experienced militants from Oriente exacerbated this trend. Thus, at the end of 1957, both the M-26-7 and the PSP were raising the same call for a general strike, but their understanding of the term was completely different.

PSP militants had been involved in the strike actions in Oriente and the PSP wished to gain some credit for this. So, while the party extolled the strike, they counterposed the *lucha de masas* to armed action in barely concealed criticism of the M-26-7. Their sectarianism is illustrated by the fact that the name of Frank País receives no mention anywhere in *Carta Semanal* at the time⁷⁶. Denying the government charges of terrorism, the PSP called for a united front of all opposition movements, including the M-26-7, to fight for a democratic solution to the crisis⁷⁷, a position quite consistent with their interventions in the working class movement since the sugar workers strike.

The CNDDO had gained some influence amongst workers in the previous two years, operating semi-legally and raising immediate economic demands combined with abstract propaganda in support of the Soviet Union⁷⁸. At this stage, the denunciation of "terrorism" was quite sincere and in line with their strategic approach which aimed at the steady reconstruction of their working class base as their contribution to the cross-class popular front they believed would defeat Batista. Their legalistic approach is demonstrated both by a leaflet from the *Comité de Defensa de las Demandas de los Trabajadores de Ómnibus Aliados* that was openly signed by a dozen bus drivers⁷⁹ and by an open letter that the CNCCO sent to President Batista in January 1958, calling for the re-establishment of constitutional guarantees⁸⁰. Nevertheless, the leaders of the PSP recognised the political importance of the M-26-7 and were well aware that they were

⁷⁴ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.78-9

⁷⁵ Hart, *Aldabonazo*, (2004) p.168

⁷⁶ *Carta Semanal* (August 1957)

⁷⁷ *Carta Semanal* (21st August 1957) pp.1-3

⁷⁸ *Trabajador Azucarero* (October 1956) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13A1/1.1/23

⁷⁹ *A Todos los Trabajadores de los Ómnibus Aliados* (July 1956) IHC archives, ref :1/8:13A1/5A1/1-4

⁸⁰ *Carta abierta* (January 1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13A1/1.1/69

competing with them for influence in a working class that the PSP thought of as its private constituency.

The leaders of these two opposition groups therefore drew very different conclusions from the August 57 strike, both using the experience to reinforce an entrenched position. Fidel Castro's view of a general strike was still based on the concept of an armed popular insurrection in support of the rebel army⁸¹. The PSP, on the other hand, 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 government⁸². With both organisations committed to a general strike, albeit with a completely different understanding of the term, there was some basis for the discussions which started in February 1958 with the arrival in the Sierra Maesta of a PSP delegate, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, who was under instructions to try to bring the M-26-7 into the PSP's proposed popular front⁸³.

⁸¹ Franqui, Carlos, *Diary of the Cuban Revolution* (1980) pp.220-221

⁸² *Carta Semanal* (21st August 1957) p.3

⁸³ Karol, *Guerrillas in power* (1970) pp.150-151

Chapter 4 - April 1958 Fiasco

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, was a complete disaster and cost the lives of many of the movement's best underground activists. In the few areas where the strike was actively followed, such as Sagua la Grande, the subsequent repression was particularly severe, with Batista's chief of police issuing the instruction: "No wounded, No prisoners"⁸⁴. The M-26-7 view of a strike, which had emerged after the events of the previous August, had caused them to give responsibility for its organisation to the *Movimiento Resistencia Cívica* in Havana; an organisation which had neither the experience nor the networks capable of fulfilling their role and indeed collapsed shortly thereafter. 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.

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 interests⁸⁵. The M-26-7 had not learned the lesson of the sugar strike, which had shown the importance of the economic struggles in radicalising workers⁸⁶, and thus rejected the PSP's insistence on the importance of raising "immediate demands"⁸⁷. Julia Sweig's researches also provide evidence that anti-communist elements in the Havana M-26-7 underground were unhappy with Castro's discussions with the PSP and refused to organise joint strike committees with communists for sectarian reasons⁸⁸.

Faustino Pérez, who was in overall charge of the operation, said that the success of the August 1957 strike convinced him that conditions existed for the final uprising that would overthrow

⁸⁴ Cabrera, *Sagua la Grande escribió su nombre en la historia*, (1959) pp.36-39&122-3

⁸⁵ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.44-5

⁸⁶ Rodríguez, *José Antonio Echeverría y la clase obrera* (1967) p.55

⁸⁷ *Carta Semanal* (28th August 1957) p.1

⁸⁸ Sweig, *Inside the Cuban Revolution* (2002) pp.126-131

the regime and this led to an unrealistic view of the balance of forces⁸⁹. The strike organisers were so confident that they 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. 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 suspended the constitution and placed the army and police on a war footing, while the CTC bureaucracy had stepped up its anti-Castro propaganda, accusing the M-26-7 of stabbing the working class in the back, and issuing threats that any worker supporting the strike would be dismissed and that the union would not support them. To this end, the CTC drew up lists of suspected militants for the police and the employers⁹⁰.

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

The process of picking up the pieces began with a meeting on May 3rd 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. David Salvador was replaced as leader of the FON by Níco Torres, who, was not only more efficient, but also had much greater experience of revolutionary trade union activity⁹¹. Prior to the April strike, the FON was based on the personal following of different leaders in each area, many of whom had a sectarian approach to other parties. Its main task had been raising money for arms for the guerrillas and the distribution of

⁸⁹ Pérez, *La sierra, el llano* (1969) p.73

⁹⁰ *Bohemia* (19th April 1959) p.58-61&111-2

⁹¹ Tennant, *Dissident Cuban Communism* (1999) p.302-319

propaganda⁹². Surviving leaflets mainly speak in anti-government slogans calling abstractly for a revolutionary general strike with few references to any specific working class demands⁹³.

The new FON leadership showed a change of style immediately with the issue of a manifesto in May 1958 that took responsibility for the fiasco, while maintaining that a general strike is the most efficient way to defend and extend workers rights as well as "curbing the sinister despotism that is strangling our republic"⁹⁴. The manifesto attacked Mujal and the government in a more 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 FON⁹⁵ leaflet calling for a railway strike in Las Villas in protest at the late payment of wages, which is very much more convincing in style and content than the FON leaflet calling the April 9th strike⁹⁶. Another theme of the reorganised FON was a call to unity, which reflected the realignment towards the communists that was emerging from the discussions between Fidel Castro and the PSP delegate Carlos Rafael Rodríguez.

In a much quoted article⁹⁷ 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 so⁹⁸. 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. Be that as it may, these discussions took place in the aftermath of the failure of the April strike and, while the PSP had been informed of the likelihood of a strike, they had been given no details and had not been involved in its planning. On the morning of the 9th PSP members were as much at a loss as everyone else. Thus, for example, leaflets distributed by the *Comité de Defensa de las Demandas Obreras de Mariano* in early April referred to the forthcoming Mayday with no inkling of the events about to occur⁹⁹. There is, however, no evidence

⁹² *Bohemia* (19th April 1959) p.59

⁹³ *Compañeros y compañeras* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:14/1.1/5

⁹⁴ *Manifiesto del FON* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:14/1.1/6

⁹⁵ *A los compañeros ferroviarios* (n/d) IHC archives, ref:1/8:14/1.1/7

⁹⁶ *Huelga General Revolucionaria* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:14/2.1/1-2

⁹⁷ Thomas, *Cuba*, (1998) pp.1002-7

⁹⁸ Guevara, *Pasajes de la guerra revolucionaria* (2001) p.245

⁹⁹ *¡Por la Unidad Obrera!* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13A1/8-1/1

for Bonachea's unsubstantiated allegations that the PSP collaborated with the police on the day¹⁰⁰. The CNDDO kept a tactful silence on the disaster¹⁰¹, but the party journal, *Carta Semanal*, was vitriolic, attacking the M-26-7 for sectarianism and for sterile commando raids producing the unnecessary deaths of brave young people¹⁰². *Carta Semanal* also noted the relative greater success in the eastern provinces and condemned divisions in the opposition¹⁰³ - the subtext here being that in the east there was a greater tradition of united working class action involving Communist workers. Nevertheless, they admitted that the limited but courageous response showed that the workers saw the necessity of a general strike. The terror unleashed by the regime following the strike, widely reported in the party's press, started to convince the PSP 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 action¹⁰⁴. It had also become 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 national leadership therefore decided, towards the end of April, to publicly support the guerrillas¹⁰⁵ and, later in the year, they went so far as to set up their own armed group in Las Villas¹⁰⁶.

There was much common ground between the egalitarian nationalist politics of the M-26-7 and the orthodox communist notion of the "Popular Front", 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: differences that were compounded by deep mistrust of the PSP as a result of its alliance with Batista in the 1930s and 40s. 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 much slower.

¹⁰⁰ Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection*, (1974) p.221

¹⁰¹ *¡Viva el Primero de Mayo!* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13A1/1.1/74

¹⁰² *Carta Semanal* (23rd April 1958) pp.1-4

¹⁰³ *Carta Semanal* (16th April 1958) pp.4

¹⁰⁴ Sims, *Cuban Labor and the Communist Party* (1985) p.55

¹⁰⁵ García-Montes & Alonso-Avila, *Historia del Partido Comunista de Cuba* (1970) p.526

¹⁰⁶ Anderson, *Che Guevara* (1997) p.338

The other decision taken by the M-26-7 at Altos de Mompíe, 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 5 - The Summer Offensive 1958

Faustino Pérez recalls in a later interview that one of the reasons for the failure of the April 9th strike was that workers would not strike without adequate armed support¹⁰⁷. 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 army and police, while they had demonstrated ruthless efficiency when shooting down poorly armed students or unarmed striking workers, were not nearly so determined when faced with well trained and politically motivated guerrillas who rapidly gained the military upper hand in the second half of 1958. Bonachea¹⁰⁸ 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 year¹⁰⁹.

The growth in the M-26-7's own workers' organisation removed the urgency from the discussions with the PSP on the question of merging the FON and the CNDDO and, while discussions aimed at uniting all oppositional workers' organisations started on 21st June at a meeting convened by the M-26-7, final agreement was not reached until 10th November when the FON formally merged with the CNDDO, as well as with the much smaller *Secciones Obreras* of the DR, the *Auténticos* and the *Ortodoxos*, to form the *Frente Obrero Nacional Unido* (FONU)¹¹⁰. This new organisation adopted a 12 point programme that called for a 20% wage increase, for opposition to mechanisation along with other measures against unemployment, for an end to racial discrimination, for social protection for women, children and the unemployed, for the reinstatement of victimised workers, for trade union democracy and the end to the compulsory check-off as well as for the reinstatement of the 1940 constitution¹¹¹. This last demand represented much more to

¹⁰⁷ *Bohemia* (19th April 1959) pp.111-2

¹⁰⁸ Bonachea & San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection*, (1974) p.263

¹⁰⁹ Alexander, *History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002) p.159

¹¹⁰ PCC, *Historia del movimiento obrero cubano* (1985) pp.352-360

¹¹¹ Alexander, *History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002) p.161

workers than a desire for political democracy, about which they proved largely indifferent, for the 1940 constitution contained important employment rights that they had lost under the Batista regime¹¹². While these demands reflect the immediate interests of the working class and would cost the employers a considerable sum to implement, there was nothing here that in any way challenged the capitalist basis of the economy.

On 8th December, Raul Castro, who commanded the "Frank País Second Front" in the Sierra Cristal mountains convened, in the name of the FONU, a congress of workers' delegates that endorsed the 12 point programme as well as formally repudiating the *mujalista* control of the CTC and adding to the list some demands specific to the sugar industry, which were subsequently endorsed at the First National Conference of Sugar Workers in Liberated Territory held on 20th and 21st December in the area controlled by Camilo Cienfuegos¹¹³. During this period there was little or no formal industrial action taken, as most workers saw little point in risking their lives and livelihoods in advance of the increasingly likely military victory of the rebel army. The more militant could always satisfy their impatience with sabotage or even going to the mountains to join the rebel army. The FONU occupied itself during this period by raising support for the guerrillas and calling for *Comités de Unidad Obrera* to be set up.

The success of this unity drive varied from region to region with Santiago, predictably enough, providing most evidence of real unity. The first of a series of surviving leaflets produced by the *Comité Municipal de Unidad Obrera* from Santiago de Cuba is dated October 1958¹¹⁴, thereby predating the formal setting up of the FONU. The detailed references to the problems of bus drivers, dockers and brewery workers indicate a solid base in the working class of the city, while the call to boycott Coca-Cola, with which the leaflet finishes, is clear evidence of PSP inclusion in the work of the group, given Communist leadership of the Coca-Cola dispute in Havana and the importance the party placed upon it¹¹⁵. Later publications from Santiago took on a more political and anti-imperialist tone. One such leaflet dated December 1st likened American intervention in Cuba to past US practice in Korea, Lebanon and China, as well as highlighting racism in the

¹¹² Blackburn, *Prologue to Revolution* (1963) p.70

¹¹³ Bonachea & San Martín, *Cuban Insurrection*, (1974) p.278

¹¹⁴ *Comité Municipal de Unidad Obrera de Santiago de Cuba* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13/40/1

¹¹⁵ *Carta Semanal* (8th October 1958) pp.4

southern states of the USA itself¹¹⁶. Other *Comités de Unidad Obrera* were set up as the rebel army advanced on Havana. For example, a meeting of the *Comité de Unidad Obrera de la Provincia de Las Villas*, meeting in Santa Clara on 2nd January 1959, heard reports that, in response to the sugar workers conference of 20th December, the M-26-7, DR and CDDO sections in various sugar mills had held separate assemblies that had unilaterally joined together to form a joint committee representing all factions, that the *Comité de Unidad Obrera* had taken over the CTC building in Santa Clara and that the local branch of the *Federación Nacional Gastronómica* had undertaken the provision of food for the city following its fall to the rebel army¹¹⁷. They went on to call meetings in the localities to elect delegates to a democratic provincial council, urging workers to turn up in great numbers to these meetings to keep out the *mujalistas* and "other servants of tyranny"¹¹⁸. This was particularly important in Santa Clara where some of the union bureaucracy had tried to opportunistically change sides at the last minute¹¹⁹; an accusation that some commentators have equally levelled at the PSP.

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 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 and 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.

So for instance, as early as March 1958, PSP supporters in San Miguel de Padron, Havana province, had set up a *Comité Obrero Revolucionario*, as an attempt to put into practice the party's proposal for joint strike committees. In addition to calling on all workers, including supporters of the M-26-7, to support a revolutionary general strike aimed at achieving the creation of a democratic coalition government, this would-be strike committee went on to salute the courageous guerrillas in

¹¹⁶ *Contra los bombados a la población civil y contra la intervención americana* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13/40.1/2

¹¹⁷ *Acta de una reunión de la Comité de Unidad Obrera de Las Villas, 2 enero* (1959) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13/36.1/1-2

¹¹⁸ *A los trabajadores de Las Villas* (1959) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13/36.1/4

¹¹⁹ Anderson, *Che Guevara* (1997) p.354

the mountains¹²⁰. There is archival evidence of similar initiatives taking place elsewhere¹²¹. It would be a mistake to see the PSP as an undifferentiated bloc and, as well as differences within the national leadership, the membership in some areas were more favourable to the armed struggle than in others, San Miguel de Padron being an example of this. Nevertheless, by the autumn, the party's whole trade union experience and influence was mobilised to campaign for support for the guerrillas¹²². The CNDDO's campaign for the release of the recently arrested David Salvador in October 1958 is in marked contrast to their sectarian attitude to the death of Frank País noted earlier¹²³.

Thus we see a process of political convergence between the M-26-7 and the PSP that was accompanied by growing but still passive support for the rebels within the working class. The flight of Batista, however, would give rise to the need for more active mass participation.

¹²⁰ *¡Obreros Hermanos!* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13/27.1/1

¹²¹ *Comité de Frente Unico de Trabajadores de la Rosalia* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13/26.1/1

¹²² Farber, *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (2006) p.157

¹²³ *¡Salvemos la vida de David Salvador!* (1958) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13A1/1.1/74

Chapter 6 - January 1959 Overthrow

Assessments of the importance of the January 1959 general strike differ greatly. Thus, for example Samuel Farber writes:

*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. It turned out to be a well-deserved revolutionary holiday for the Cuban working class rather than an instrument of struggle*¹²⁴.

This evaluation is completely contradicted by 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 revolution¹²⁵.

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"¹²⁶? Those members of Batista's general staff who had been left behind were clearly plotting with the US ambassador in a last minute attempt to prevent the victory of the M-26-7 and, despite Castro's swift deployment of the columns commanded by Guevara and Cienfuegos to Havana, there was a danger that an army coup, particularly if it had an honourable patriotic officer at its head, could have split some of the middle class support away from the M-26-7 and prolonged the civil war¹²⁷. Whether or not this danger was serious is immaterial, the possibility of 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 in the previous November¹²⁸. A more realistic analysis of the role of the January strike than that provided by Farber is therefore to argue that it 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

¹²⁴ Farber, *Revolution and reaction in Cuba* (1976) p.202

¹²⁵ Castro, *Discursos del comandante Fidel Castro* (1959) p.8

¹²⁶ Farber, *Revolution and reaction in Cuba* (1976) p.197

¹²⁷ Karol, *Guerrillas in power* (1970) pp.167-168

¹²⁸ Peña, *Cuban Workers and People Resist Batista's Brutal Dictatorship* (1958) p.18

of violent disorder and lynch mob rule that had followed the downfall of Machado¹²⁹. The scale of the action is evident from contemporary photographs¹³⁰, while the ease with which the strike succeeded does not mean that it was unnecessary.

The strike also served as a launch pad for a wave of strikes and demonstrations organised by the purged trade unions whose new local leaders responded to the upsurge of militancy by workers wanting to reclaim the losses they felt they had suffered under the dictatorship because of the collaborationist policies adopted by the CTC under Mujal. Strikes and the threat of strike action became common and workers made considerable gains in wages and conditions during the first half of 1959, frequently with the support of the new Ministry of Labour¹³¹. As the immediate demands were settled and the first wave of enthusiasm receded, the Ministry and the national leadership of the CTC increasingly imposed a restraining hand, which was at first opposed by a PSP that had been excluded from the CTC leadership¹³².

The politics of the PSP and the M-26-7 may have converged through 1958, but their organisational differences and the mutual distrust remained. Castro arranged for Níco Torres and Conrado Bécquer, the latter still in his olive green uniform as a *comandante* of the Rebel Army¹³³, to fly directly to Havana and supervise 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 committee¹³⁴. The PSP were excluded and the CNDDO wrote a furious letter to David Salvador, newly appointed provisional general secretary of the CTC, complaining that Torres and Bécquer had told them that the FONU was now dissolved and excluding them from decision making and even from entering the building¹³⁵. The PSP did not prosper in the local union elections that followed in January 1959 and had to await Castro's intervention after the 10th congress of the CTC in November of that year before they gained seats on the CTC executive¹³⁶.

¹²⁹ Hart-Phillips, *Cuba* (1959) pp.38-43

¹³⁰ Glinn, *Havana* (2001)

¹³¹ Kapcia, *Cuba* (2000) p.103

¹³² Pérez-Stable, *Cuban Revolution* (1999) pp.67-71

¹³³ *Bohemia* (11th January 1959) p.102

¹³⁴ Del-Cueto, *El 26 de Julio en la dirección sindical* (1959) pp.50-51

¹³⁵ *Carta a David Salvador, 13 enero 1959* (1959) IHC archives, ref:1/8:13A1/1.1/104-6

¹³⁶ Alexander, *History of Organized Labor in Cuba* (2002) p.201

Thereafter, however, they loyally restrained their members from agitating for strikes over wages and conditions while concentrating on mobilising support for the forthcoming nationalisations¹³⁷.

Thus the organised Cuban working class, while having taken little industrial action, either economic or political, over the summer following the failed April 9th strike, played a significant role in the events of the seizure of power by the M-26-7. In so doing, the workers made considerable economic gains and successfully purged the *mujalistas* from the CTC bureaucracy.

¹³⁷ Blackburn, *Class forces in the Cuban Revolution* (1980) p.89

Conclusion

Harold Sims writes that:

*"The 1950s rebels could mobilize only a limited segment of organized labour for the anti-Batista cause"*¹³⁸.

Gladys García-Pérez, on the other hand, maintains that:

*As the armed forces started repressing the trade union movement and supporting the employers, the confrontation between capital and labour became a political-military conflict. Workers became aware that their interests were affected not only by employers but by the armed forces, who used violence and harassment and jailed their top leaders.*¹³⁹

An examination of archive material from the period supports García-Pérez's conclusions. Those writers who take the position argued for by Sims make two errors: they do not take sufficient account of the different layers and currents within the labour movement and they lack an adequate periodisation, seeing the Batista dictatorship as an undifferentiated whole.

It is simplistic to confine an understanding of the Cuban labour movement to the formal structures of the CTC and it has been demonstrated that workers adapted flexibly to the problems posed by a violent and corrupt dictatorship. This response was not constant over the period but ebbed and flowed with the changes in political and military circumstances. There were regional variations as well, with the east of the island showing much greater militancy than the west, particularly in August 1957.

The importance of the support given to Batista by Mujal and the CTC bureaucracy should not be underestimated. Control of the formal trade union structures had given the regime a certain legitimacy in its early days, but Mujal's abuse of that control finally made him the second most hated man in Cuba after the dictator himself. The class struggles of 1955 exposed the inadequacies of the *mujalista* leadership of the trade unions and won support for the rebels, but that support could not be taken for granted and the workers would not support a strike in 1958 that they could see was suicidal. Nevertheless, when confronted with a favourable military balance of forces, the organised working class were more than ready to give active support to the revolutionary process and, in so doing, ensured the final victory of the M-26-7 and its allies. The general strike of January 1959 must be seen as a decisive moment in the overthrow of the dictatorship.

¹³⁸ Sims, Harold, *Cuba's Organized Labour from Depression to Cold War* (1998) p.53

¹³⁹ García-Pérez, *Insurrection and revolution* (1998) p.41

The various attempts to mobilise that active support showed the strengths and the weaknesses of the various parts of the opposition and started the process of bringing the M-26-7 and the PSP together; a process that would have considerable significance for the next stage of the Cuban revolution. Mass involvement however remained within the bounds set by the nationalist alliance led by Fidel Castro. It did not threaten the capitalist nature of the economy but, within that reformist perspective, organised labour managed to advance their material interests considerably.

Thus the Cuban working class cannot be seen to have acted as *a class for itself*. Nevertheless, as part of a nationalist cross-class alliance, workers successfully managed to defend their perceived interests and contributed a great deal to the downfall of the dictatorship. These conclusions are significant because any revision of the way in which working class involvement in the insurrectionary period is seen will have consequences for our view of the post-revolutionary period. There remains a large amount of underused archive material that would undoubtedly repay further research, not only so that we can obtain a more detailed view of the labour movement in the 50s, but also to continue investigations into popular involvement in the nationalisations of the early 60s and thereby, to borrow E P Thompson's phrase, to rescue the Cuban working class from the "condescension of history".

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