

## Foreword

*'The war constitutes an encouraging example of what can be achieved by the tenacity and revolutionary will of the people. The revolutionary armed combatants, in the final phase of the struggle, scarcely numbered three thousand men .... Our workers and peasants, integrated into the Rebel Army, with the support of the middle class, pulverised the tyrannous regime, destroyed the armed apparatus of oppression, and achieved the full independence of the country. The working class, with its revolutionary general strike in the final battle, contributed decisively to the triumph [of the Revolution]. This brilliant feat of our Revolution in the military terrain is little known outside the country. It has been published in anecdotal and sporadic form, but a documented and systematic history of it remains to be written'*  
[Fidel Castro, 'Informe Central', 1975, p29]

Fidel Castro's retrospective analysis of the insurrectionary phase of the Cuban Revolution – delivered at the first Congress of the Cuban Communist Party in 1975 – recognises the contribution of *la clase obrera* (the working class) to the revolutionary struggle, but confines this contribution to two areas: active service in the rebel army, and the general strike of 1 January 1959. While the latter receives minimal attention in historical accounts of the Revolution, the deeds of the small band of revolutionary *guerrillas* continue to exert a powerful hold on popular and scholarly depictions of its eventual triumph. Despite the rhetorical invocations of the *pueblo* (the people) by the revolutionary leadership, and despite the official embrace of Marxist-Leninist ideology from 1961, there remains surprisingly little 'documented and systematic' analysis of the contribution of Cuban workers to the eventual overthrow of the detested Batista regime. Yet as this engaging and meticulously researched book amply demonstrates, a militant and well-organised labour movement – often operating independently of union leaders – 'played a pivotal role in the victory of the Cuban insurrection', not only through the final *coup de grâce* of the 1959 general strike, but in myriad actions that served to defend workers' interests, resist state repression, and materially support the armed struggle. Thus, 'there was a third arm to the revolutionary forces, a labour movement, which has been consistently ignored by both general and labour historians of Cuba alike'.

Scholarly neglect of the role of organised labour in the Cuban Revolution can be partly explained by the nature of the official trade union organisation, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC) under the leadership of Eusebio Mujal. As this book vividly describes, working hand in glove with the Batista regime, the CTC leadership was responsible for gross abuses including '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'. By 1957, in the wake of further anti-communist purges carried out with the full backing of state security forces, the CTC was 'openly [operating] as Mujal's personal fiefdom'. However in conflating 'organised labour' with the corrupt bureaucracy of the CTC, scholars have overlooked or underestimated the activities of ordinary workers and the critical role they played in resisting not only the corrupt trade union leadership but also the iniquities of the Batista regime. Cushion's work calls for a broader definition of 'organised labour', looking beyond the formal structures of the trade union federation to include the 'multiplicity of unofficial, informal structures through which ordinary workers defend their interests'. This includes 'the activities of shop stewards, independently-minded union officials, strike committees, regional committees, mass meetings and unofficial [as well as clandestine] networks of militants, all of which make up the wider labour movement and interact together to produce the dynamic of industrial action'.

What emerges in this book is a lively and variegated picture of working class activism that sheds new light on the struggles of workers, ranging from those employed in the more traditionally 'proletarian' sectors of sugar, transport, textiles and utilities, to those in shops, department stores, and 'white-collar' professions in offices and banks. Drawing on a wealth of untapped sources including material from local and provincial archives, interviews with veterans of the labour and revolutionary movements, clandestine publications, leaflets, pamphlets and other political ephemera encompassing previously unused collections from activists' personal archives, the book offers a rich and detailed account of labour activism in 1950s Cuba. This activism – often undertaken at considerable risk to its protagonists - took multiple forms, from go-slows, walkouts and solidarity strikes, to mass meetings and street demonstrations, to sabotage and the formation of clandestine cells that would form the basis of the workers' section (*Sección Obrera*) of the guerrilla movement. Thus for example we see

railway workers in Guantánamo developing the tactics of *sindicalismo beligerante* (trade unionism on a war footing) that combined mass action with acts of 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’. Further west, in Matanzas, we see a textile workers’ strike leading to the complete shut-down of the city – with female workers in the Woolworth’s store playing a central role in enforcing the *ciudad muerta* in defiance of state security forces who attempted to force them to reopen the store. And in Oriente, we see mass demonstrations and a general strike initiated in response to the murder of M-26-7 leader Frank País, which constituted ‘probably the biggest public demonstration of opposition during the entire Batista dictatorship’. As Cushion argues, this strike, so often characterised as ‘spontaneous’, suggests the existence of ‘a high level of clandestine organisation which was able to react quickly and seize an opportunity without requiring orders to do so’.

This attention to local contexts constitutes one of the many contributions of this book. Looking beyond Havana to consider actions right across the island, Cushion highlights the existence of an energetic and independent milieu of local labour activism, often acting autonomously from, and indeed sometimes in defiance of, the central labour leadership. Thus for example sugar workers at the *Delicias y Chaparra* mills in Las Tunas undertook strike action on their own terms after the *mujalista* union officials melted away at the first sign of trouble. These workers ‘[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’. In Santiago, members of the local PSP ‘acted in defiance of direct instructions from the leadership in Havana’, calling strikes to support the November 1956 Granma landing by M-26-7 rebels – an action considered ‘adventurist’ by the party’s national leadership. This attention to local traditions of activism, local networks and solidarities, and local responses to national events, contributes to a more variegated picture of working class activism that highlights the differences and tensions between and within the trade union and political leadership and the rank and file, and between the capital and the provinces. It also helps to explain the different outcomes across different sectors and regions, for example, contributing to our understanding of why strikes in some sectors succeeded in achieving their goals while others were defeated. Hence Cushion’s regionally

differentiated analysis of the August 1957 strike suggests that it was more effective in areas where the M-26-7 and the PSP had a history of established collaboration.

Taken together, the workers' struggles provide a compelling account of how organised labour contributed directly and indirectly to help shape the course of revolutionary struggle in 1950s Cuba. As Cushion depicts so vividly here, workers provided valuable material support for the rebel guerrillas in a number of ways, including organising significant strike action in support of the Granma landing and armed uprising in Santiago. While workers in shops, warehouses and distribution depots 'proved valuable by large-scale pilfering of essentials', railway workers 'were able to move those supplies under the noses of the police', while bus drivers 'formed propaganda distribution networks' and telephone operators 'eavesdropped on police conversations', providing vital intelligence for those more directly engaged in the armed struggle. Others organised clandestine networks involved in acts of sabotage such as derailing an armoured train carrying soldiers sent to protect the vital railway system, and helping disaffected soldiers to desert. Such actions depended on a high degree of organisation that reached its apotheosis in the revolutionary general strike of 1 January 1959. Overlooked in much of the literature, this strike is reassessed here for its 'decisive' contribution to the triumph of the revolution – securing the capital, heading off a potential army coup, and ensuring the victory of the revolutionary forces. This analysis aligns with Castro's own estimation of the strike's significance. Thus for Cushion, the final victory of the revolutionary forces should be viewed as the result of a combination of armed guerrilla action and mass support.

Cushion's analysis also casts a fresh eye on working class politics in the period, assessing the relationship between organised labour and the two main organisations seeking to mobilise the working class: the PSP and the M-26-7. In so doing, he brings a new perspective to both, highlighting for example how local traditions of labour militancy directly contributed to the development of the M-26-7's network of clandestine workplace cells (the *secciones obreras*), while showing how mistakes made at the leadership level derived partly from their lack of experience of labour organising - contributing to the failure of the general strike called for 9 April 1958. And while the PSP has often been considered a latecomer to the revolutionary struggle, Cushion underscores the 'immense contribution' made by rank and file communists in 'sustaining levels of working class discontent in areas where they had influence', often

at considerable risk to their lives. Meticulously tracing the evolution of the relationship between the M-26-7 and the PSP, the book provides a much more nuanced picture of the internal debates within and between these two organisations, the points of commonality and difference in their respective approaches to confronting the Batista regime, and the local specificities informing the mixture of competition and collaboration that characterised relations between the two. Cushion's detailed analysis of joint endeavours such as the *Comités de Unidad Obrera* and the *Frente Obrero Nacional Unido* (FONU) suggests that the coming together of the M-26-7 and the PSP 'started at the working class base of both organisations'. Local, grassroots collaboration between PSP and M-26-7 members in the workplace provided a 'solid base for unity' on which to construct the attempted national organisation of a workers' united front.

In foregrounding the courageous struggles of Cuban workers and their families in the face of increasing state brutality, this rich and engaging book makes a welcome addition to the literature on the Cuban Revolution.

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#### Reference

Fidel Castro, 'Informe Central', Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba, Departamento de Orientación Revolucionaria del Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Cuba, La Habana, 1975.