

# Exiles Ask Work, Not Welfare

By GENE BOURG

"I didn't want to be a parasite," said Jose Pegueno, brushing away a tear. "I don't want relief money because I have worked all my life. There is no reason to stop now."

Pegueno is 73 years old. He is one of thousands of Cubans now living in New Orleans who fled the Communist regime of Fidel Castro.

In Havana, he had been earning an excellent salary as a foreman for an American shipping company. Today he is a dishwasher and handyman in a St. Charles Avenue restaurant, a job which it took a year to find.

HIS AGE has not dampened Pegueno's will to work, and his wife Juana works beside him at the restaurant. She has degrees from the University of Havana in public administration and administrative law.

"The welfare people told me it was not necessary for me to work," said Pegueno in the neatly furnished living room of his apartment on Josephine Street. "But I was ashamed to go and beg for a check. The only thing I wanted them to do for me was to find me a job."

Although the details would differ, Pegueno's story is repeated in general thousands of times in New Orleans. Estimates of the Cuban refugee population in the city range from 10,000 to 15,000. Of these, less than 400 adults and

about 160 children are receiving welfare assistance, and the bulk of the adults who do get help receive old-age pensions.

MRS. ELISE CERNIGLIA, director of the Catholic Cuban Center, estimates the exile job force in this city at 5,000, with the average pay scale at \$600 per month.

This would place the total annual income of Cubans related here at \$30 million to \$40 million. "The demand for Cuban workers is often bigger than the supply," says Mrs. Cerniglia, whose staff finds jobs, homes, relatives and friends for about 20 families coming in each week. If jobs for them cannot be found in New Orleans, they usually resettle in another Louisiana city or another nearby state.

"We get calls almost every day from employers all over the area," she said. "They'll even take those who speak no English."

THE REASONS for the Cuban worker's popularity, said Mrs. Cerniglia, are that he is ambitious and loyal. Placing skilled workers and laborers is easier, however, than assisting professionally qualified doctors, lawyers and teachers, she commented. Academic requirements and licensing regulations have forced once-affluent professionals into comparatively menial jobs to support their families.

About 25 small businesses in New Orleans are owned by Cuban refugees—jewelry stores, bakeries, super markets, shops and service stations. In most cases, their owners arrived in the United States penniless. "Welcome to the only department store in New Orleans owned and operated by two lawyers," says Carlos Bringquier in his Decatur Street shop. Bringquier opened the store with his brother-in-law in 1964 with \$300. In 1966 their sales volume reached \$120,000 for the year. "I was not a businessman in Cuba," he

says, "but I had to learn to be one in the United States."

WHEN HE arrived in New Orleans at 24 in March, 1961, Bringquier found his law background made him "over-qualified" for many jobs. But he ultimately found work as a stevedore, and later as a peddler and retail clerk in a Canal Street store.

(A great-uncle of Bringquier's, Federico Laredo Bru, was president of Cuba from 1937 to 1940. His father, Julio Bringquier, was a Cuban judge who had sentenced to prison the two pickpockets who are now serving Castro as chief of

them sanctuary and live-in-hoods.

THE CUBAN population in New Orleans of course does not approach Miami's 225,000 and the impact of their presence here is consequently not as pronounced as it is in the Florida city. Unlike Miami, New Orleans has no geographic concentration of Cuban residents. Several families often live in the same block or apartment building but every section of the city contains its share of refugees.

"They like to be near their work," said Mrs. Cerniglia. "When they first arrive, I usually place them in the Parkchester apartments on

police and commander-in-chief of the Cuban army.)

When the exodus of disenchanted Cubans began in the early 1960s, New Orleans was one of many American cities which feared the refugees would be a great burden. There are now strong indications that this city has benefited rather than suffered from the influx of Cubans. They have proven to be industrious, law-abiding people who repeatedly express gratitude to the United States for giving

Turn to Page 4, Column 7

Paris Avenue.

"But within a few weeks," she continued, "most of them have settled in another part of the city in their own apartments or rented homes."

THE CLOSEST any area of New Orleans comes to being a commercial "little Havana" is the Canal Street section near Decatur, Magazine and Camp streets. The 100 block of Decatur contains a few shops and bars owned by Cubans.

A handful of Cuban businesses also dot uptown Magazine Street — bars, a restaurant, a bakery, a service station and a beauty parlor.

Benito "Benny" Borges came to New Orleans in 1960 with \$3.50. He held a number of jobs before investing his savings in October, 1968, in a





ONE OF A SCORE of Cuban refugees who have become successful businessmen in New Orleans is 27-year-old JORGE NOVVO, at left. Working in the kitchen of a St. Charles Avenue restaurant



are JOSE PEQUENO and his wife JUANA, who refused to settle for the welfare checks they could accept as refugees.

—States-Item Photo.

bar at 2101 Magazine. Today the Guantanamo Room, which Borges built himself, is a \$20,000 business.

In 1965, Borges was a welder here. His employer found a need for more workers and Borges went to Miami to find them. He returned to New Orleans with 28 men to fill the jobs.

ONE OF the 28 was young Jorge Novo, who had been a midshipman in the Cuban Naval Academy before Castro communized the island.

Novo now has a jewelry store at Canal and Magazine with some \$75,000 worth of merchandise.

In Cuba, Novo's father operated a jewelry and loan business but the younger Novo had no substantial business experience himself.

While working as a welder here, Novo supplemented his salary by selling door-to-door. With a Small Business Administration loan of \$25,000, he opened his store four months ago.

NOVO PLANS to apply for his United States citizenship this year. "But if someday Cuba becomes free, I will return," he says. "We belong to our country, and it will need people to rebuild it."

Although Cuban refugees enjoy most of the privileges afforded American citizens, the aliens among them are confronted with some restrictions, even in employment.

Citizenship is a requirement for city civil service jobs, and although there is no such restriction in state civil service regulations, preference is given to registered voters of Louisiana.

Language can also be a hurdle in employment, especially when testing is involved.

But the experience of New Orleans with Cuban refugees remains a success story, and it is based on the determination of these Latin Americans to overcome obstacles, combined with the receptive attitude of the city's employers and inhabitants.

(Second Article in a Series of Four)