

Cuba—Guns and Sugar

by Leopoldo Aragon

This past April and May, over a million people—from Fidel Castro and his cabinet down to and including members of the diplomatic corps—cut sugar cane in what may have been the greatest popular mobilization in this hemisphere. It was as if 20 million Americans had left their jobs and homes to spend days, in some instances weeks, to save a grain crop in the Midwest—and doing it for free, except for transportation, room and board.

I was in Cuba for part of this time, and being skeptical of “socialist volunteer work,” I went looking for long faces at the bus station terminal in Havana, where the “volunteers” were arriving from the fields. I didn’t find them. Truckload after truckload rolled in, the passengers singing sugar crop songs, particularly one that is the current rage, *Qué Rica Está la Caña* (How Sweet the Cane Is), music by Mozambique King, Pello el Afrocán, and lyrics by Pello and Fidel Castro.

Ernesto “Ché” Guevara has been out of the limelight for months now, raising the most varied speculations that he had committed suicide, been fired as Minister of Industries, taken asylum in the Algerian Embassy, left for the war in Vietnam, was en route to a meeting of Communist Parties in Montevideo, Uruguay, defected and sold revolutionary secrets to the US for \$10 million. None of them is true. I saw him cutting cane in Oriente Province.

People in Cuba know that sugar means foreign exchange with which to buy things, and that this exchange has to be earned with blisters and aching backs. The cane crop is expected to go over 40 percent of last year and to be either the best or next-best in Cuba’s history. It is worth more than \$300 million at current depressed world market prices, prices that spell ruin to high-cost producing countries and those who invested heavily in equipment and planting in the hope of getting into the American market vacated by Cuba. Depressed world prices are not fatal to Cuba, however, because of the new sugar agreement with the Soviet Union, which guarantees payment of almost double the present free market quotations for the entire crop and all future crops until 1970, when production is expected to reach 12 million American (short)

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tons, as compared with the 7.2 million tons this year. Under the agreement, selling or not selling in the open market is left to Cuba’s discretion.

To me, who had known pre-revolutionary Cuba and been there four years ago, the contrast between past and present is symbolized by the use of “we”; as when people say “we are doing this, or that.” In the rest of Latin America, it is “I” and “they.” To be sure, not everybody says “we,” but the “I” mentality of the old politicians (and of most of the exile activists I met in Miami) would sound jarring in Havana.

The new Cuba does not yet have a fixed profile of its own. I am reasonably sure it will be neither capitalistic nor quite like anything else in the socialist world. It will be proud, nationalistic and anti-imperialistic. For the moment, the cult of personality is strong. Fidel is believed in passionately, and in turn passionately believes his country is “The First Free Territory of America.” He displays inordinate confidence in the battle-cry of the Revolution: “Fatherland or Death! We Shall Conquer!”

US intervention in the Dominican Republic has, of course, given Castro a propaganda bonus. Cuban airwaves are crowded with shrill commentaries: “We were right,” “we told you so.” They quote with relish scathing denunciations of the US from every corner of Latin America, especially from individuals known for their pro-American views. The government has been skillful in “proving” that the exiles’ aim is to do in Cuba what has been done in the Dominican Republic, a revolting prospect to any self-respecting Cuban, whether or not he approves of the Revolution.

The larger Cuban towns, particularly Havana, are a study in contrast: manicured parks and boulevards, and dismal shops. Semi-durable and durable goods are scarce, of the lowest quality imaginable and outrageously priced. They are strictly rationed, which seems rather foolish since people can’t afford them. Another superfluous regulation is the ban on the honking of automobile horns: most of the cars don’t seem to have mufflers and roar louder than a hot-rod. The characteristic noises of Cuba have not changed: yelling at the top of one’s lungs, music blaring from radios. The Cuban woman is still swathed in a dress that threatens to burst at the seams with every bounce. Nightlife is subdued in comparison to former years, but would seem wild to a sedate Washingtonian. It is

among those whose occupation most directly benefited from pre-revolutionary tourism that one finds the largest proportion of critics of the Revolution.

As in all countries, the visitor is likely to be in more frequent contact with taxi drivers, bartenders, waiters, hotel keepers, entertainers, etc., to say nothing of prostitutes — than with other segments of the population. He might conclude from their remarks that 60 or perhaps 70 percent of the people are against the regime. I would largely agree with those figures, so far as this group is concerned. One must look elsewhere for partisans of the regime — among farmers, laborers, office workers, students, the armed forces, the militia and, above all, the *becados*, the couple of hundred-thousand kids whose studies, room and board, clothing and various other necessities are provided through scholarships.

In brief, Cuba is not the paradise of the travel brochures, but it is not the hell painted by the exiles either. In Havana (1.5 million) and other cities, one does not find the abysmal misery of other Latin American urban centers, nothing approaching the slums of Lima, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Panama, Mexico City, Rio or Sao Paulo. The rate of illiteracy, according to UNESCO, has been reduced to 3.8 percent, as compared to 18.5 percent in the next most literate

country in Latin America, Argentina. One hears people in Cuba talk of 1962 to mid-1963 as "the horrible year." I can imagine how it must have been. I was there in mid-1961, after the Bay of Pigs, and it was bad. "Now," residents say, "you go to the grocery store and you get what is due to you according to your ration card; it isn't much, but you get it." And every so often you get a surprise. The grocer says, "Today I have some extra potatoes, or rice or a chicken!" A British journalist commented to me that, "Calorie per calorie these people don't know what rationing is." He was referring to British rations during and immediately after World War II. He pointed out that bread and sugar have never been rationed here. "Now they consume twice as many calories by coupons as we did. They have all the food they want in restaurants, and all the beer and drinks they can hold — and, they are almost in a permanent state of war." Eggs are off ration, and *malanga* (the equivalent of potatoes to a German in the Cuban diet) is expected to go free soon. There is the black market in the cities and a virtually open market in the countryside; food rationing is Greek to the *campesinos*. Luxury restaurants like the famed 1830 and La Torre are useless to the population; prices there are as high as in the Four Seasons in New York. But places such as the old Hemingway hangouts, Floridita and Sloppy Joe's, serve moderately priced food in gargantuan portions.

Judged by Latin American standards and in comparison to 1961, Cuba has unquestionably improved, and there are three main reasons: experience gained after much trial and error; technical and material cooperation from the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and other socialist countries including China; and the circumventing of the US trade embargo. It is acknowledged that it was the British Leyland Company, by its sale of buses, that cracked open the blockade. "Before," Cuban officials say, "it was Leyland that made news; now it is the company that does not sell to us which makes news." A visitor sees numerous Western salesmen at the Riviera, Havana Libre (néé Hilton), and Nacional Hotels. Their presence is taken as evidence of Western European business confidence in Cuba's future.

There is no institution in Cuba today where the cohesion of power and efficiency is more patent than in the armed forces. The Revolutionary Army cannot be compared with anything I know in Latin America. The closest thing to it is the US Marine Corps. There are over 125,000 crack troops at the ready, plus an active reserve of another 150,000. They are very well equipped with the latest weapons available to Warsaw Pact countries — most importantly, quantities of mobile rockets (surface to surface and surface to air), plus anti-aircraft and anti-personnel canon. Mili-



The Wayward Buses

tias trained in street and mountain fighting are said to number close to half a million. One hears of some not-visible-to-the-visitor armaments that are supposed to be the equivalent of a few of the elements in Big-Power arsenals. In his April 19 speech Fidel said: "Let the imperialists dispel from their minds any illusions about getting off scot-free after starting 'little fires' here [as in Vietnam]. The day they start a *fueguito* [little fire] here, will be the day when they start the *fuegazo* [the great big fire] . . . and everything floating around this island will be blown to bits. . . ."

Western diplomats in Havana with whom I spoke believe that, even discounting direct Soviet intervention in the case of an attack by the United States, there would be enough punch left in Cuba to sink any invading armada *at sea*, after the ex-

pected saturation bombardment of the island.

I have the solid impression that Fidel Castro is not interested in reestablishing normal diplomatic or economic relations with the United States, at least for the time being; or in having back the technicians who fled. On the contrary, negotiations seem well under way toward letting "unadaptable elements" migrate to Spain. The Santo Domingo affair has for the time being ended Russia's insistence that Cuba seek those relations with the US. Trade with the US, which would have been enticing, has lost much of its attraction because of the realignment of the Cuban economy toward other markets, and the increasingly steady supply of American spare parts coming to Cuba from US subsidiaries in Europe, or from substitutes of local and foreign manufacture.

Of, By and For the Poor

The New Generation of Student Organizers

by Andrew Kopkind

More than anything, the new generation of students cares about democracy. They have talked about it, written about it, demonstrated about it. Now they have begun to organize people to change their communities into more democratic forms. Their theories of change are being put into practice in Mississippi and parts of a few other Southern states by SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and its followers, and in 11 Northern cities by SDS (Students for a Democratic Society). Its practitioners are almost all in their twenties (or younger), and their education and experience is not exceptional. But they have — perhaps uniquely in this generation — grasped the enormity of the contradictions in the American experience, and they have committed themselves to work for basic social change. They may not succeed; the odds against a significant shift in a huge technological society of 200 million people are incalculably high. But already the new organizers have had an impact greater than the modesty of their numbers would suggest.

Their movement, like all "ferment" on college campuses in the past half-decade, has to be understood in the context of the civil rights movement. The struggle

for minimal participation by American Negroes in American democracy "peeled away the façade" (in the current jargon) from the architecture of society, and those who were in the fight saw that there was more to discrimination than weak laws or racial prejudice. For the students of the 'sixties, Birmingham and Albany and the Mississippi Summer was the new American Revolution. At the core of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement last fall was the same battle cry that had been heard in the counties of Mississippi: "Let the people decide."

It is the same slogan that the SDS organizers wear on buttons as they work with the Negroes of Clinton Hill, a slum in the South Ward of Newark, New Jersey. It is the same phrase that SDS organizers in Cleveland's Near West Side, a poor white slum, use in protesting the politician-run poverty program.

SDS has a prehistory as the unfortunately-named SLID — the Student League for Industrial Democracy. Without the students, the parent league is a kind of camp for itinerant old leftist intellectuals — or those who think old. In the summer of 1962, the new SDS students met near Port Huron, Mich., and approved a