

Impressions of Cuba—V

State Farm Cane Cutter Is Symbol Of Red Failure Despite Better Pay

This is the last of five articles on a wide-ranging visit to Cuba.

By Dan Kurzman
Staff Reporter

Juan Rodriguez, a slim, wrinkled sugar-cane cutter on a Cuban state farm, earns more than \$100 a month, lives in a neat, three-room house, and eats and dresses better than ever before.

Outwardly, he is a symbol of communism's success in Cuba; in reality he is the symbol of its failure. For although Juan, like some 400,000 other landless state farm workers, is living better than in pre-revolutionary days when his home was a leaky straw hut, he is working less.

However exploited he was by his big landlord, who hired him only during the three-month harvest season, his productivity was relatively high. For he was paid on an incentive basis.

No Incentive Now

Since he receives a straight salary today, he sees no reason why he should exhaust himself cutting cane—no matter what Industries Minister Che Guevara might say about the "incentive of conscience."

Because most campesinos are of a similar mind, Cuban sugar production nosedived last year despite increased sugar acreage, and may plummet even further this year. As sugar provides about 80 per cent of the nation's foreign exchange, Juan has in effect sabotaged the economic program of the man he has honored with these heartfelt words painted on the door of his house: "Gracias Fidel."

While waiting for Russia to develop an adequate cane-cutting machine to compensate for ideological failure, the government has been trying to shield its embarrassment behind the argument that the American-imposed economic blockade is largely responsible for Cuba's deteriorating economic condition. Actually,

the blockade has played a relatively minor role.

The problem of spare parts for American-made machinery is slowly being met. A new Havana factory is now specializing in the production of needed parts. Parts are being purchased from Canada and Western Europe. And American machines are gradually being replaced with Communist bloc equipment.

No Great Change

Moreover, if the blockade were lifted, Cuba's pattern of trade—except for spare parts—would probably not change appreciably. Cuba has found that new machinery from the Soviet bloc costs less than the American brand, even including the extra shipping costs—and it can pay on 100 per cent credit terms.

As for sugar, Russia has already agreed to buy half of the Cuban production every year until 1970 at a generous guaranteed price of six cents a pound, and other countries are buying the rest. Nor would the resumption of United States trade mean a flooding of Cuba with luxury goods; Cuba has the money to pay only for the most essential foods and machines, and it has no desire to "spoil" people who must be oriented to Communist austerity.

Import Rate Up

Further accentuating the limited economic value of the blockade — as distinguished

from the psychological value—is the current rate of imports, which actually exceeds average pre-Revolution figures.

Thus, while imports continue to pour in, exports have decreased, and living standards have steeply dipped—except in the case of Cubans who, like Juan Rodriguez, were part of the bottom 20 or 30 per cent and had nowhere else to go but up.

The inevitable conclusion to be drawn is that not the blockade but internal political and economic policies are largely responsible for the current mess—which has put Cuba in the Communist bloc's debt to the tune of \$2.3 billion so far.

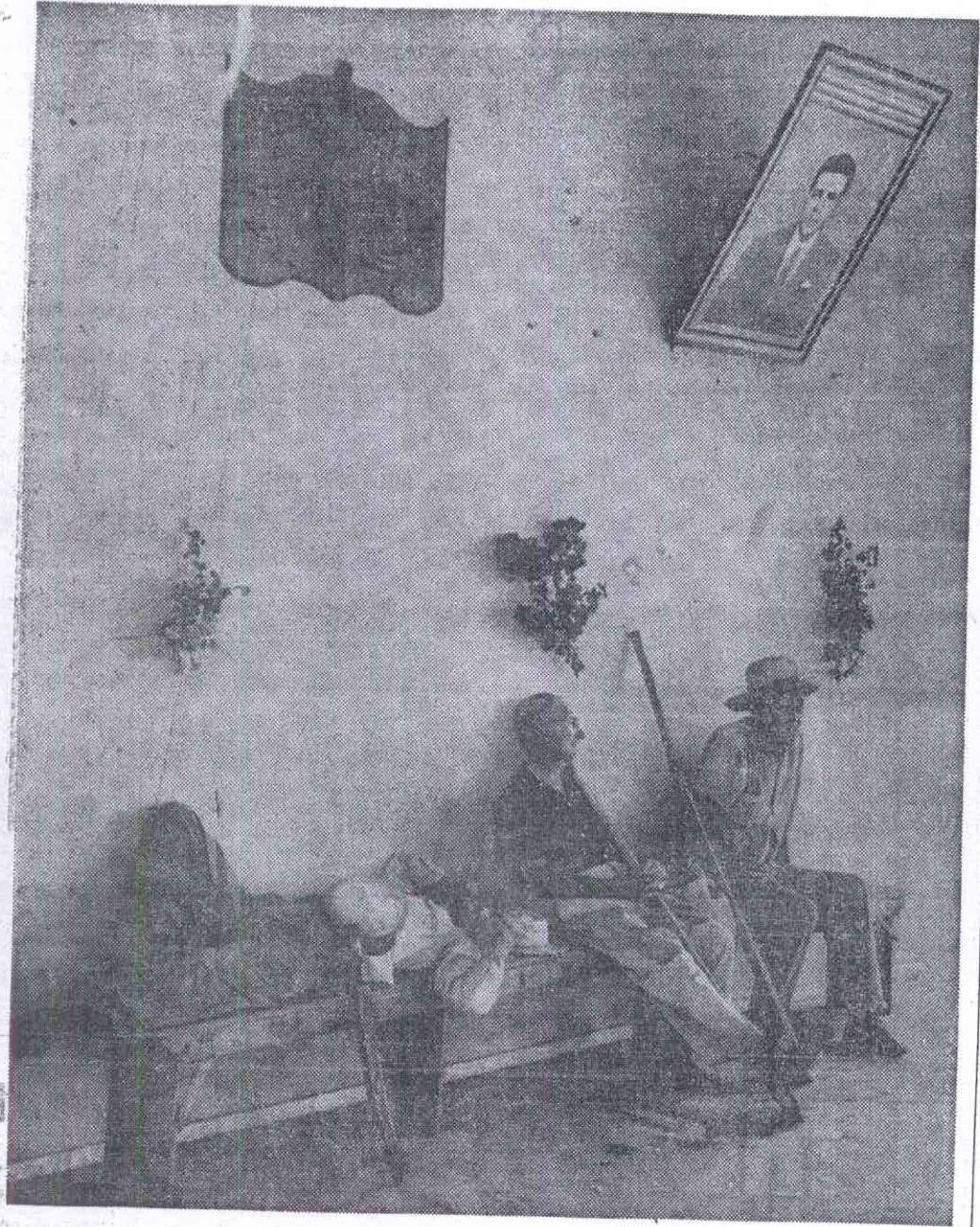
If the production of sugar, which is grown mainly on state farms—they constitute about 70 per cent of Cuba's farmland — has dropped sharply, such staple crops as rice, much of it cultivated on private farms, have also diminished. This is true largely because private farmers enjoy fewer free marketing opportunities than previously. (Black marketing involves considerable risk of heavy penalties.) Nor is there much to buy with their money when they make it.

Minute Quantities

Even foods that have increased in production, such as eggs, tomatoes, and potatoes, are not getting to the people except in the most minute quantities. Despite the food shortage, it appears that the bulk of tomatoes, as well as fruits, are being exported in order to earn foreign exchange.

At the same time, a chaotic, if improving distribution and managerial system has all but choked off food supplies in some areas, though no real hunger prevails in Cuba. In one case, when the refrigeration in a supermarket stopped working, the manager threw the meat away rather than distribute to customers more than their ration of three-fourths of a pound per week.

The Soviet bloc is insisting that if it is, in effect, to subsidize Cuba, the least Castro can do is clean up this mess. But even with the improvement of distribution and managerial techniques there is serious doubt among qualified observers in Cuba that Castro can overcome an obstacle that



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Workers on a state farm in Cuba pause for their traditional siesta.

still plagues even the Soviet Union itself, as attested by its wheat purchases from the U.S. — the lack of economic incentive. And this problem is compounded by the Latin tendency to take life easy.

While most peasant workers like Juan Rodriguez support the Castro regime, even while lying down on the job, most industrial workers are probably less enamored with it. For their economic condition has worsened since the Revolution.

Seeks to Answer Apathy

Salaries of new employes have either gone down, or if they were relatively low before, remained the same. Also, the working week has been extended from 38 to 44 hours, with most workers expected to put in many additional hours of "volunteer" labor. A substantial reduction in rent and a free lunch offer little compensation for this deterioration of labor conditions.

The government is seeking the answer to peasant apathy and worker discontent in a broadening program of ideological education. Blas Roca,

former leader of the now-dissolved traditional Communist party, told me that some 100,000 Cubans, 70 per cent of them agricultural and industrial workers, have so far attended ideological training schools.

Their job will be to indoctrinate their colleagues sufficiently to make them work harder and to complain less.

Meanwhile, more than 70,000 young people, mostly the sons and daughters of such workers, who might not have had the opportunity for an education under previous regimes, are attending scholarship schools where they live throughout the year — distant from moderating home influences. So strongly pro-government are they that in one case in which a youth scrawled "Down with Fidel" on a wall, they took the initiative in having him expelled from school.

Nevertheless, such successes must be weighed against the powerful, if silent, anti-Communist influences. Most of the 150,000 students attending regular secondary schools are believed to be strongly opposed to the government. Virtually all of the 140,000 private farmers—who cannot sell or leave their land to their children—are dissatisfied.

Bitter Opponents

Most industrial workers, as already noted, are hardly reveling in their new—and low-paying—role as "owners of their own factories." And the decimated upper and middle classes, whose members are either fleeing abroad, working

as petty bureaucrats, or driving taxis, are, for the most part, bitter opponents of the regime.

Western diplomats in Cuba speculate that some 40 per cent of the people support the government. More important, they say, all but about 10 per cent of these "revolutionaries" are more Fidelista than Communist, meaning that communism might disintegrate if Castro, who himself has been trying to limit the power of the traditional Reds, vanished from the scene.

Maria Is Typical

Maria, who learned about Marx and Lenin in college and then joined the militia, is a typical revolutionary. While showing me Havana dressed in jeans, sweater, and beret, she hesitated to accompany me into an ancient church, fearful that she would be ridiculed by the churchgoers for her "revolutionary" attire.

Finally, Maria, a tall attractive girl with smiling brown eyes, entered, only to be told by the priest to leave. She left, tears in her eyes.

"They don't understand," she mumbled. "They don't understand."

And Maria cared.