

Che Guevara and Voluntary Work: a legacy for the revolutionary movement

Introduction

Che Guevara's most enduring legacy in Cuba has been his indelible contribution to socialist political economy and economic management. Between 1959 and 1965, Guevara set up the budgetary finance system to prove that it was possible and necessary to develop consciousness and productivity simultaneously in the transition to socialism. The system was openly articulated as an alternative to the economic management system operating in the Soviet bloc. To this end, Guevara took up the challenge at the heart of the revolutionary process: achieving economic development with equity from a position of underdevelopment, but without relying on capitalist mechanisms that would undermine the collective consciousness of the Cuban people, while trying to strengthen the new social relations that the revolution made possible. His approach to this problem remains relevant in Cuba today, and his ideas are still key to maintaining the vitality of Cuban socialism. Now that six decades have passed since the revolutionary victory over the Batista dictatorship, contemporary developments and reforms relating to Cuba's economic system, and the debates these reforms generate, are still best analyzed in terms of their proximity to Guevara's theory of how to build a socialist society.

Fidel: 'Voluntary work was one of best things Che left us'



Volunteer workers build new apartment building in Havana, January 1988. Fidel Castro said renewal of widespread voluntary labor, originally advocated by Che Guevara, achieved what state bureaucrats said was impossible — building 20,000 new housing units in the capital.

[Che Guevara: Economics and Politics in the Transition to Socialism](#) by Carlos Tablada is one of *Pathfinder's Books of the Month*. It was originally published in Cuba

in 1987 as part of the rectification process initiated by Fidel Castro. This involved the mobilization of working people in a political fight to reverse damage from years of bureaucratic economic planning Cuba adopted in the early 1970s modeled on those of the Stalinist Soviet regime. Fidel led this fight, calling for a revival of the political and economic course championed by Ernesto Che Guevara, which is outlined in the book. Excerpts from the introduction are printed below. Copyright © 1998. Reprinted by permission of Pathfinder Press.

BY MARY ALICE WATERS

In the 1987 speech that serves as a prologue to this book, [Fidel] Castro remarks that “at a given moment some of Che's ideas were incorrectly interpreted and, what's more, incorrectly applied. No serious attempt was ever

made to put them into practice, and there came a time when ideas diametrically opposed to Che's economic thought began to take over." ...

By the early 1980s, however, the devastating political consequences of the course that had been copied and imported [from Eastern Europe] were becoming increasingly clear as communist political consciousness among Cuba's working people faltered, demoralization spread, and corruption grew. ...

By 1986 Cuba's communist leadership, with Fidel Castro in the lead, had launched the revolutionary political counteroffensive on questions of economic policy that became known as the rectification process. Corruption and privilege were systematically addressed and substantially reduced. Living and working conditions of agricultural workers and others in the lowest-paid categories were improved. Childcare and other needs of women workers were given new priority.

From the outset of the rectification process, volunteer labor — “one of the best things [Che] left us during his stay in our country and his part in the revolution,” said Castro — was revived in Cuba. It was promoted by the leadership as a lever of revolutionary action to take steps forward, through collective efforts, to address the most pressing social needs such as housing, nurseries, clinics, and schools. For some fifteen years, Castro said, such efforts had been steadily on the decline because of “the bureaucrat's view, the technocrat's view that voluntary work was neither basic nor essential,” but rather “kind of silly, a waste of time.” Beginning in 1986, however, voluntary labor was reborn. The construction “mini-brigades,” as they were called, assumed an even greater centrality to the revolution and the working class than similar efforts during the early years of the Cuban or Russian revolutions.

Rectification took on the character of a growing social movement led by Cuba's most conscious and disciplined working people, who were convinced that the brigades opened the road toward a return to proletarian methods that could advance the revolution and strengthen social consciousness.

Just as the bureaucratic parties and regimes of Eastern Europe and the USSR were finally beginning to shatter in face of irresolvable economic, social, and political crises building up for decades, the Cuban revolution was gaining strength along the lines of the communist political course of rectification. This renewal, Fidel explained in his October 1987 tribute, would have given Guevara much joy and confidence, just as he would have been “appalled” by what had preceded it. Because, Castro said, Che “knew that communism could never be attained by wandering down those worn capitalist paths and that to follow along those paths would mean eventually to forget all ideas of solidarity and even internationalism.”

As the rectification process was gaining new momentum in 1989, the Cuban revolution was suddenly confronted with the most severe economic crisis in its history. The crisis was precipitated by the abrupt decline in aid and trade on favorable terms with the disintegrating regimes in the Soviet bloc. The “special period,” as it is known in Cuba, registered a decline in economic production estimated at some 35 percent — equal to or greater than the fall in U.S. output during the opening years of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Stepped-up efforts by Cuba's revolutionary government to find new trading partners and sources of development capital were met by intensified economic warfare instigated and organized by Washington.

Enemies of the working class the world over gleefully predicted that the revolutionary government of Cuba would soon suffer a fate similar to the regimes of Eastern Europe and the USSR. They were wrong once again. They failed to understand — as they had many times before — that the proletarian internationalist course associated with Che's name in Cuba and around the world was not his alone, but was indeed the trajectory of Cuba's communist leadership, deeply rooted among the big majority of Cuba's working people. This was not a variant of the course in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but its polar opposite.

No other government in the world could have survived the test of popular support that Cuba's revolutionary leadership has faced in the 1990s. In meeting the challenge of the special period, moreover, the Cuban working

class has emerged stronger, not weaker. Today it is more conscious of its historic responsibilities, and more confident of its collective capacity to resist, to fight, and to win. The rectification process of the previous decade was decisive in this outcome. ...

What Cuba faces today is not a crisis of socialism, however. Above all, the Cuban toilers are confronting the brutal realities of an economically underdeveloped country in a world still dominated by capitalism, and the terms of struggle imposed by the exploiting classes on those who are determined to chart a way forward for humanity. ...

It is the capitalist world that will face the gravest crisis in the years ahead. "The exploiters are starting to get afraid again," Castro noted. "They're afraid of social upheaval, afraid of social explosions, afraid of chaos . . . because they don't really know what's going to happen."

Che: 'Youth must be the motor force of our revolution'



INSTITUTE OF CUBAN HISTORY Che Guevara, center, took lead in initiating voluntary labor in early days after Cuba's 1959 revolution. In future socialist society, he wrote, work will be transformed, turned into production for society without the compulsion of forcing workers to sell their labor power as a commodity.

The Spanish edition of [Che Guevara Talks to Young People](#) is one of Pathfinder's Books of the Month. After joining Fidel Castro's July 26 Movement, Ernesto Che Guevara, the heroic Argentinian-born revolutionary, helped lead the first socialist revolution in the Americas. He also led and initiated a renewal of Marxism. A central leader of the revolutionary government from 1959, he was also a leading Cuban representative abroad. From 1965 he led Cuban internationalist fighters in joining revolutionary struggles in the Congo and then Bolivia. Wounded and captured by the Bolivian army on Oct. 8, 1967, he was murdered the next day. The excerpt is from "Youth Must March in the Vanguard," a speech Che gave as Minister of Industry at a seminar on youth and the revolution, May 9, 1964. Copyright © 2000. Reprinted by permission of Pathfinder Press.

BY ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA

In Cuba the ideology of the old ruling classes maintains its presence through the consciousness of individuals, as I indicated earlier. In addition, it remains present because it is constantly being exported from the United

States — the organizing center of world reaction — which physically exports saboteurs, bandits, propagandists of all sorts, and whose constant broadcasts reach the entire national territory with the exception of Havana.

In other words, the Cuban people come in permanent contact with imperialist ideology. This is then repackaged here in Cuba by propaganda outfits scientifically organized with the goal of projecting the dark side of our system, which necessarily has dark sides because we are in a transitional period and because those of us who have led the revolution up to now were not professional economists and politicians with a lot of experience, backed by an entire staff.

At the same time, they promote the most dazzling and fetishistic features of capitalism. This is all introduced into the country, and sometimes it finds an echo in the subconscious of many people. It awakens latent feelings that had barely been touched owing to the speed of the process, to the huge number of emotional salvos we have had to fire to defend our revolution — where the word “revolution” has merged with the word “homeland,” has merged with defense of every single one of our interests. These are the most sacred of all things for every individual, regardless of class background. ...

The main way the youth must show the way forward is precisely through being the vanguard in each of the areas of work they participate in.

This is why we have often had certain little problems with the youth: that they weren't cutting all the sugarcane they should, that they weren't doing as much voluntary labor as they should. In short, it is impossible to lead with theories alone; and much less can there be an army composed only of generals. An army can have one general, maybe several generals and one commander in chief if it is very large. But if there's no one to go into the battlefield, there's no army. And if the army in the field isn't being led by those who have gone into the field themselves, who've gone to the front, then such an army is no good. One of the attributes of our Rebel Army was that the men promoted to lieutenant, captain, or commander — the only three ranks we had in the Rebel Army — were those whose personal qualities had distinguished them on the field of battle. ...

So the technological revolution must have a class content, a socialist content. And for this to happen, there must be a transformation of the youth so that they become a genuine motor force. In other words, all the bad habits of the old, dead society must be eliminated. One cannot think about a technological revolution without at the same time thinking about a communist attitude toward work. This is extremely important. We cannot speak of a socialist technological revolution if there is not a communist attitude toward work.

This is simply the reflection in Cuba of the technological revolution taking place as a result of the most recent scientific inventions and discoveries. These are things that cannot be separated. And a communist attitude toward work consists of changes taking place in an individual's consciousness, changes that naturally take a long time. We cannot expect that changes of this sort will be completed within a short period, during which work will continue to have the character it has now — a compulsory social obligation — before being transformed into a social necessity. In other words, this transformation — the technological revolution — presents the opportunity to get closer to what interests you most in life, your work, your research, your studies of every type. And one's attitude toward this work will be something totally new. Work will be what Sunday is now — not the Sunday when you cut cane, but the Sunday when you don't cut cane. In other words, work will be seen as a necessity, not something compelled by sanctions.

But achieving that requires a long process, a process tied to the creation of habits acquired through voluntary work. Why do we emphasize voluntary work so much? Economically it means practically nothing. Even the volunteers who cut cane — which is the most important task from an economic point of view — don't accomplish much.

A volunteer cutter from this ministry cuts only a fourth or a fifth of what a cane cutter who has been doing this his whole life does. It has economic importance today because of the shortage of labor. It is also important

today because these individuals are giving a part of their lives to society without expecting anything in return, without expecting any kind of payment, simply fulfilling a duty to society. This is the first step in transforming work into what it will eventually become, as a result of the advance of technology, the advance of production, and the advance of the relations of production: an activity of a higher level, a social necessity. ...

Today we have begun a process of, let us say, politicizing this ministry. The Ministry of Industry is really cold, a very bureaucratic place, a nest of nit-picking bureaucrats and bores, from the minister on down, who are constantly tackling concrete tasks in order to search for new relationships and new attitudes.

Ernesto Che Guevara on Voluntary Work and Economic Efficiency

By Rolando Sarmiento Ricart/ / Collaborator
rcadigital@rcagramonte.icrt.cu

Fifty-one years ago, on November 22nd, 1959, Commander Che Guevara established the voluntary work at the time the Revolution was building its first construction work: the El Caney de las Mercedes School, in the Sierra Maestra mountain range, so that the children of the peasants who lived in the highest mountains of Cuba could have access to the education, until then inaccessible for them.

Since that day, Che headed the Sunday mobilizations to work in the agriculture, the construction works, the industrial facilities and on the sugarcane plantations... and promoted the idea that in these voluntary works, people had to be more productive than in their normal workdays.

Now that the 6th Congress of Cuba's Communist Party (PCC) is approaching and the Project of Guidelines for Social and Economic Policies urges us to be more efficient and productive, raise the production of material goods, and definitely get rid of the inadequacy of the economic management and smooth away the losses caused by the climatic phenomena, the global crisis and the genocidal U.S. blockade ... Che Guevara's lessons are more valid than ever before.

A long time ago, in 1960, Che said: "... We must all stand together, all the peoples of the world must stand together to obtain the most sacred things: freedom, economic well-being, the feeling of not having absolutely any unsurmountable problem ahead, and knowing that with everyday work—enthusiastic and creative—we can meet our goals, and no one will get in our way."

How did Che see the consolidation of Socialism? Che Guevara said that he saw it by means of the development of the productive factors and the increase of the production of material goods intended to the consumption of the whole population. There we go, re-structuring our labor force, being more productive and ensuring the best use of the working time.

Voluntary work is actually not unrelated to the process underway in Cuba. This still is that sweaty link that connects cadres and intellectuals with workers and farmers in the roughest chores. Of course, if we distort its essence it can become a drag on the economy. Otherwise, it should be a complement to boost any productive activity if the circumstances so merit.

Each Cuban has participated in at least one instance of voluntary work. A work that makes you feel satisfied when the crop swiftly reaches your home, and then you say: we harvested this sweet potato in this or that

cooperative farm, or you simply walk with your family near an outpatient clinic, school, or grocery store that you helped to build.

The economy and its recovery for the social welfare of all will be discussed in the 6th Congress of the PCC [Cuban Communist Party] in order to face points of view that fervently oppose the Revolution and Socialist Cuba and try to pass this off as an economic reform, and not what it actually is, an authentic updating of the Cuban economic model.

The Socialist island aspires to achieve efficiency, productivity, labor and technological discipline, without leaving anyone behind, but being resolute in its purpose as Che always was.

Che Guevara: Work and Workers

Publicado el 11 octubre, 2014 • 12:11 por Alina Martínez

Trabajadores Órgano de la Central de Trabajadores de Cuba

One day, while Commander Che Guevara was doing Voluntary Work in a workshop of graphic arts, he stopped to watch a worker who was doing some unnecessary movements as he was doing his job. He asked the worker to let him personally do the work, and he managed better productivity. It was not the case that by then the minister of Cuban Industry, who had just arrived in that workshop, was better than that machine operator; but it was the application in practice of the concepts that Che had developed in relation to work.

For Che, production was not a part of a person's life with no links with that individual, a relationship that only exists because he receives a salary: "...we should all be obsessed right now with increasing production, increasing productivity, fighting for cost savings, and making technological innovations of all kinds. That should be the goal of all of us, so we have to devote ourselves with the five senses to the task we are doing."

The Cuban labor universe is very different nowadays from the one Che was a witness to; however, this and many other ideas are still in force, like the one that socialism is neither a miraculous creation nor the exclusive result of conscience, but the job of humans.

In this transition period work should have a new basis, because the means of production have gone from the hands of society and the machine – symbol of job of the working class – to being, as Che said, the trench where we fulfill our duty.

The differences compared to capitalist society are essential: man, stressed commander-minister Guevara: "He starts reflected in his job and understand the human dimension by means of the object created, the job done. This does not mean that he leaves behind a part of himself in labor force sold, a part that does not belong to him anymore, but that now represents his own emancipation, a contribution to the common life in which he is reflected; the fulfillment of his social duty."

Che created the formula of Voluntary Work, to make himself understood in that type of distinctive concept, which also meant a contribution to society, to the welfare of the working class without compensation. According to him, it was one of the first steps in the long process of liberation of the individual who will really reach his full human condition when he is able to produce without the physical pressure to sell himself as merchandise.

It was not an idealist position what made him value the attitude toward work in a different way, but the creation, after the triumph of the Revolution, of conditions that favored it. He explained as much in a speech when he was handing in some certificates of communist work at the Ministry of Industries, when he pointed

out that when society is able to start fighting for demands, destroy the oppressor and take power, once more there is happiness in the job done for the fulfillment of a duty, feeling important in society and being motivated to promote it more and more every day, so we can have a society able to satisfy the increasing needs of the population.

That change, as he said, was not achieved automatically in a person's conscience, nor was it in the economy, and he stressed that there are periods of acceleration, while others are slow, and others even go backwards.

The extraordinarily complex situations the Revolution has had to face after these ideas were aired have hurt those values closely related to behaviors at work, like being industrious and responsible, but they were not given less importance than the need of assigning them the category of a social duty, as Che conceived it, because it is indissolubly linked to the social project we are building.

In the Guidelines of the Economic and Social Policy of the Party and the Revolution, this concept embraced not only the need to rescue the role of work and the income received for it, and not only its capacity to satisfy the personal needs of the worker and his family, but also "as the main way to contribute to development."

Both State and non-state jobs have the goal of achieving that double purpose, and it is not a utopia but an imperative of the current circumstances for the workers, who one way or another make a contribution, to be able to feel as a fundamental part of a system built to defend the prosperity and sustainability of our socialism.

[The following longer article gives some of the historical background of the political and economic circumstances that existed in Cuba—and around the world—that helped shape Che's ideas on political economy. Che's goal was always to promote the birth of a new consciousness among those tasked with defending the conquests of the Revolution: the workers and campesinos of Cuba. It is based on information found in a book written by the Mexican writer and journalist Paco Ignacio Taibo II.]

Chronology of The Economic Ministry of Comrade Guevara after the Revolution in Cuba

A secondary interpretive account

Written by: William Stodden; May 17, 2000 **Online Version: [Che Guevara Internet Archive](#)** (marxists.org) 2000

A good source for the activities of Ernesto Che Guevara's leadership of the Cuban Economy after the Revolution is found in a comprehensive biography on the man written by Paco Ignacio Taibo II and translated into English by Martin Roberts. Taibo is a Mexican writer who conducted interviews of many of the participants of the Cuban Revolution of 1956-1959 concerning their memories of Che Guevara. His research is very complete, using reports from the Cuban Government and texts and speeches by Guevara, and probably a good half of the text in his book are the words of Che Guevara himself. It has been said by Taibo, and agreed with by those who reviewed this book, that Guevara was the second narrator of this book. The book is an excellent source for Che's activities, contains a huge reference section of articles about Che's work and life and proved invaluable to the writing of this short essay.

During the Cuban Revolution of 1956-1959 led by Fidel Castro, in which Ernesto Che Guevara participated and became a commander in the Rebel Army, the goals of the Revolution changed from one of deposing the

Dictator Fulgencio Batista, to a broader-based social and economic movement, which featured agrarian reform as one of its main tenets. A large part of the Guerilla forces led by Castro and Guevara, sometimes above 80 percent, were peasants, some dispossessed, all abused by the feudal land arrangements in Cuba before the Revolution. Many of the campesinos worked day in and day out for just barely enough to support a family. Nearly all the peasants were diseased or malnourished. This fact led Castro and Guevara to understand the need for the Agrarian Reform program, instituted soon after the Revolution was accomplished while they were still fighting the Revolutionary War (Guevara, 102).

Che's agrarian program was simple. It was the Zapatista line of "Land for those who work it." This seemed simple to him and was justified by the reality of the countryside, where those who worked the land had nothing and it caused all sorts of problems. This line was subverted by leaders of the national movement which was supposedly coordinating activities with revolutionary aims throughout the country. In reality there were several factions within the national movement that were decidedly against each other, and in fact fought with each other and stole from each other, and there was, as was revealed after the Revolution ended indeed no harmony between those who had different agendas. By November 1958, Che's version of Agrarian Reform was being put into place in the "liberated zone" (the zone controlled by the Rebel Army), which included confiscation of land owned by those who sympathized with Batista, and a granting of land to all those who had worked it or paid rent on it for 2 years or more. This caused all sorts of problems among the revolution's "allies", who turned out to be opportunists and tried to block the reform where they could not gain some advantage. Among those whose agenda ran counter to the Revolutionary program was a group called Front II who operated in the Sierra Escambray Mountains, near the town of Sancti-Spiritu and insisted on collecting dues on the agrarian programs instituted by the Revolutionary J-26 Movement (Taibo, 211). Earlier in the struggle, a provisional government created by the revolution's "allies" in Miami, Florida, was condemned for their opportunistic tendencies by Fidel Castro. This group of Cuban "Revolutionary" leaders (which included some in the city component of the Revolutionary J-26 Movement) decided, without including representation, or even consultation with those who were actually conducting the Revolution in the Sierra Maestra, that the government would be a coalition government of all the "revolutionary" movements throughout Cuba (Guevara, 211-227). These and several other things, (including banditry in the name of the Revolution and the desire among several other "revolutionary" elements for a military junta in Havana) led to early controversy in the Revolutionary movement of Cuba.

After the Revolution, the conflict came to a head. Che leading the Rebel Army, felt that the Rebel Army should be the guarenteeors of the agrarian reform, since the army was made of those who were peasants and those peasants were fighting not only for the Revolution, but indeed that they were fighting for a better way for the peasants of Cuba. Before the agrarian question was settled, the Cuban government in March nationalized the telephone company, and the public transportation system, and then ordered rents cut in half and lowering of the price of medicine. This was certainly the flavor of the Cuban government to come. The Agrarian Reform Law was signed into effect in May of 1959. It confiscated plantations over 1000 acres and then paid for the expropriation with bonds maturing in 29 years. Then these lands would be turned into farm co-ops run by the government or split up among the peasants who lived on them. Che rejected the act's moderation, calling it a "timid law, which did not take on so basic a task as suppressing the plantation owners" (Taibo, 277).

The Cuban Government took heat for this act from both sides. From the left, Castro was accused of mollifying large landowners and from the right he was accused of betraying the revolution by changing the aims of the movement from eliminating the dictatorship to agrarian reform. But as it happened, this was the agrarian reform that was presented in Cuba after the revolution, and from it Che moved on to other things.

On October 7, 1959, Che became the director of the Industrialization program of the National Agrarian Reform Institute (INRA) (Taibo, 288). His job was to coordinate activities among the nation's industries which had

been nationalized over the past 10 months. Che's job consisted of keeping the business under his direction going no matter what. Carlos Rodriguez, in a speech in 1987 described the purpose behind this very well. These businesses were necessary, even if they weren't what capitalists would call "profitable." They provided things the people of Cuba needed. They weren't profitable, because they had to be practically given to people of Cuba, who had little money. These products included such commodities as medicines and other essentials. Che instituted a system where the workplaces would be organized as to what they produce, and the economy would be funded by a central funding agency tied to the Cuban treasury. From there it would be easier to coordinate different businesses in the Cuban economy, and direct for production. This was another step in making Cuba a Communist nation (the agrarian reform was the first). Around this time Che also instituted a principle known as Voluntary labor, which consisted of men doing work for free during a day. It was the beginning of Che's philosophy of "a new man", where people worked for the benefit of society and from that an individual received his reward. This "moral" incentive (as opposed to a material one, where the worker receives a monetary incentive or a house or something for working hard) was far more important to Che's "New" man because it involved improving the lives of the many over the life of the individual.

In late November 1959, Che became the head of the National Bank of Cuba. When he took on the job, he left the job at the INRA to Orlando Borrego. But Che still oversaw the work at the INRA and returned to the work within the next year. Che immediately set to reforming the banking system, despite the lack of skilled economists within the bank. Che mentioned that foreign money interests had a hand in virtually every aspect of the Cuban economy, and this would cause great problems as the Revolution depended. Che implemented several controls over the amount of foreign currency held in reserve by Cuba. One of Guevara's main problems in the running of the Cuban National bank was trying to control capital flight from Cuba after the Revolution. With no capital, Cuba was not able to industrialize. Much of the capital flight early on in Che's administration was offset by a discount in the loans Cuba received for foreign nations. Nonetheless, Che did have success in the area of the agrarian reform while with the bank, and was proud to sign the first deeds of the peasants for the lands they had been given.

Later, in 1960, as the Soviet Union was offering to help Cuba financially, Che began to understand the real problem of Cuban industrial development to be that Cuba is producing only raw materials while manufactured goods had to be imported. This added up to a trade deficit from which Cuba could never recover, as long as it only manufactured raw materials. Che, along with others in the Government set about on a plan to eradicate Cuba's imports, by buying factories and machinery from Eastern European nations. He organized the bookkeeping apparatus in Cuba's economy to offset the monetary losses of some "unprofitable" industries with the gain of others, thus allowing the Cuban economy to continue without laying off more workers. Che rejected the appeals for raising wages, saying that if there were no increase in manufacture, raises would amount to simply printing more money, and then the money would be worth less, and people would become poorer. This explanation is an indication of Che's simple, yet poignant view of the economic principles upon which a socialist nation could lay. Cuba would have to produce more for there to be raises, and yet the Cuban economy continued in its course of rapid industrialization. Throughout this time, Che continued to work with voluntary labor brigades every weekend, setting the example for the entire countryside.

In the beginning of July, the United States stopped importing sugar from Cuba. It was the first sign of trouble for the Cuban economy. The cancellation of the sugar quota marked the beginning of the blockade of Cuba by America. The Soviet Union was quick to buy up the surplus of sugar which the Americans had refused to buy. Cuba became a cold war pawn, as the United States refused to trade with Cuba, and the Soviet Union picked up the opportunity, and then the United States admonished Cuba for trading with her cold war enemy. The Cuban Government returned the favor by nationalizing foreign assets within Cuba, to include oil and sugar refineries which were owned by Americans. It was a vicious cycle which led to the severing of all ties between America and Cuba, and the thrust of Cuba into the waiting arms of The Soviet Union.

Here Che's early criticism of the Soviet Union became apparent. Taibo's biography tells of a meeting Guevara had with French economist Rene Dumont. Dumont suggested, as Taibo puts it, that "nationalization and state takeovers [do] not necessarily add up to socialism" (Taibo, 306) that peasants did not feel like they owned the business that they operated, and this would lead to absenteeism and theft from the co-operatives. Che's opposition to the co-operatives was voiced here, saying it would set up a system like America's in socialist nations, where workers work for material gain, rather for the benefit of society. Che's notion of the "new man" spoken of before was developing here. People were, according to Che's economic thought, to work for the benefit of society, and from that receive their benefit. The co-operative then involved a heightened sense of individual ownership rather than work for the good of all, and it promoted a continued atomization of the workers (peasants included) for individual gains. This is why there is theft, because there is individual greed and motivation. This is why there is absenteeism, because workers don't see the benefit for all of society in their work, or they discount their work's importance. This is why there is not increased production, because the workers are waiting for material incentives which will not come, which cannot come. The Soviet system tries to incorporate worker ownership into its model, where what is needed is instead worker responsibility. This notion of the "new" man had permeated Che's economic thinking by mid 1960.

By October 1960, a report was compiled showing the critical state of the Cuban economy. It was with-held from Guevara's opinion. This report stated that Cuba's economic reserves would dry up in four months (Taibo, 309). On October 13, the United States declared an embargo on all goods entering and leaving Cuba. Cuba, in response, nationalized more sugar mills, banks and factories, giving Che's INRA a total of about 615 business to run, along with 160 sugar mills and all the mines on the island (Taibo, 309). This of course caused predictions for shortages, due to a skyrocket of demand (due to increased real wages among Cuban citizens after the Revolution and inability to import) in eggs and razor blades. This was the first sector to be hurt by the American blockade. Consumer goods disappeared over the next few years, as the Cuban economy tried to shift emphasis toward manufactured goods that it still had to import but could not now. Medicine was an early casualty of the embargo, and the United States turned a deaf ear to the fact that the embargo was killing Cuban citizens because the Cuban government did not have sufficient pharmaceuticals to treat people who were ill.

In late October 1960, Che was again abroad. His first stop was in Czechoslovakia where he obtained a sizable credit, and then he continued to Moscow, where the Cold War political game continued to be played out. Moscow announced that whatever Cuba needs they shall have. This declaration of close association was the start of several long term problems in Cuba's economy, the first and most notable being the Cuban Missile Crisis just a year and a half later and the over reliance of the Cuban Economy on the Soviet Union which collapsed in 1989, tearing the Cuban economy down with it and almost causing the end of the Revolution in Cuba. Che went on to China and received a 60 million dollar credit from China, as well as a promise from the Chinese to buy Cuban sugar. Guevara got guarantees from North Vietnam and East Germany. Upon returning to the USSR, Che had found outlets for the entire harvest of Cuban sugar.

In late February, 1961, the Industrial Department (the INRA) became the Ministry of Industry, and Guevara was appointed its Minister. He drafted a board of directors and set about to develop a centralized approach to governing the economy of Cuba. This included centralized planning of the output and centralized control of the finances of the economy. Immediately the ministry set about reorganizing the workforce so there was more people cutting sugar or picking coffee, and less people working in the surplus labor conditions of the factories. The goal was to keep people in work, to keep unprofitable blockaded industries working. This was done mainly through volunteer labor programs. In March, rationing was declared for milk, meat, shoes and toothpaste (Taibo, 322). Che insisted that even ministers of the government obey the ration.

At the end of April 1961, Che declared that all ministers will visit their factories twice a month or be docked pay. About the same time he announced that Industrial output had increased, which was excellent news. This included a 75 percent growth in steel and iron output. He also outlawed interrogations in the workplace concerning political ideologies of workers, in the wake of the Bay of Pigs invasion. However demand was fast outpacing supply and there was inflation. There were problems installing machinery purchased from Eastern Europe because there was not factories to install the machines in. The Cuban economy was traveling forward on what Taibo called "revolutionary momentum" (Taibo, 331). Later in 1961, at a National Production meeting, Che harshly spoke of the lack of quality control in Cuba. All the increases in production meant nothing if none of the products were any good. He commented, as an example of how the Coca Cola tasted like cough syrup. He sharply criticized the industries for considering quality counterrevolutionary. Despite it all, living standards were 60 percent higher in 1961 than they had been in 1959 (Taibo, 340).

In early 1962, Guevara attacked the problem of wage discrepancies, which eventually led to the simplifying of the wage scales in Cuba, and leveled wages downward. Further attempts to reorganize volunteer labor programs were made to make it more cost effective. In 1963, Che announced a switch in tactics of the Cuban economy from making new investments to consolidation of those Cuba had already made. Furthermore, a program for education of managers and workers was underway, at Che's insistence. He also criticized the growing bureaucracy that caused inefficiency in production. At the beginning of 1964, Che unveiled the new industrial investment plan which was smaller than the previous year's, and included a higher emphasis on agricultural products. This was the first step in Cuba's long plan to return to sugar manufacture being chief among concerns. As well, Che continued (and put more emphasis in fact) to working volunteer labor. Taibo quotes reports from the Ministry of Industry that say Che put in more than 240 hours of volunteer labor in the first half of 1964, among all his other responsibilities. The Ministry of Industry combined had put in 1,683,000 hours (Taibo, 385).

In late 1964, Che Guevara went to New York to speak before the United Nations. He then completed a whirlwind tour of Latin America and Africa, before returning to Cuba. Upon returning, Che decided that he would go to the Congo to support the Revolution there and try to bring Cuban guerilla tactics to a nation struggling against an oppressive dictatorship. He resigned all his offices and renounced his citizenship of Cuba and gave away all his property. Guerilla was the vocation he decided he would return to and this is the vocation he had when he died.

The Cuban experience was one fraught with mistakes made because of inexperience. Che was never one to hide facts, and he was always self-critical. But no matter what, one fact remains that no capitalistic critic of Che Guevara or the Cuban revolution will ever be able to erase. The people of Cuba enjoyed a better life after the revolution than before it. Illiteracy was wiped out. Unemployment was eliminated. Cuba became somewhat of an industrial power. It may have hurt making the transition, but the pain was necessary. In April 1961, the United States sponsored the failed invasion of Cuba, called in America, "The Bay of Pigs". The invasion was aborted because the Cuban people did not raise up to greet the exiled invaders with open arms, as the American government expected they would. The Cuban people instead, defended the Revolution, and formed militias which stopped the invasion on the beach where it had landed. The Cuban people were in full support and in full defense of the Revolution at the place called Giron Beach. Che summed up the Revolution, and the progress of the Revolution to that point in History when he explained why there was no popular support for the invasion that America had looked for with the following words: "You can't expect that a man who was given a thousand acres by his father and just shows up here to get his thousand acres back won't be killed by a countryman who used to have nothing, and now has a terrible urge to kill the guy because he [the inheritor] wants to take his [the defender] land away from him." (Taibo, 327) .

[This article shows why the ideas of Che are so important, and why the revolutionary consciousness that is forged during a revolutionary period can begin to dim and erode over time, especially as people are bombarded with imperialist propaganda while their standard of living stagnates in the face of relentless acts of imperialist aggression designed to strangle the Cuban economy.]

[Note the date of the article.]

Doing Voluntary Work...Voluntarily

December 4, 2009

Yusimi Rodriguez

HAVANA TIMES, Dec. 4 – The 50th anniversary of the first volunteer workday in Cuba was commemorated on Sunday, Nov. 22. That very first day of volunteer labor was carried out at the Camilo Cienfuegos City School and included more than 2,000 participants.

The promoter of voluntary work in Cuba was Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who considered it to be an economic, ideological and moral factor for the advance of the Revolution. It was an important element within the system of economic development foreseen by him.

He believed that in the stage of building socialism and communism, what was important was not only the fact of having shiny new factories; socialism was making possible the development of the integral human being. He believed that people should be transformed at the same time as production advanced. He felt that work was not being carried out properly if only goods and raw materials were produced and not human beings at the same time.

Che defined voluntary work as labor performed outside the normal working hours and done so without receiving additional economic remuneration. In it, work could be performed within or outside people’s regular workplaces. He felt that one of the most important tasks in the period of transition, along with the socialization of ownership of the means of production, was the creation of a new attitude toward work.

Voluntary or Obligatory?

During my life as a worker and a member of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), I have gotten upset every time they have called me to do voluntary work. I graduated as an English teacher in 1999, and in September of that year I began working in a technical school. It was also at that time that I joined the union.

A few months after having begun the school year, the union secretary came up to me to tell me that on Sunday I “had to” come to the school because there was voluntary work. I told her -half jokingly and half bothered by the tone of her voice and her overbearing attitude- that if it was voluntary I didn’t “have to” go.

My boss’s eyes opened wide, but she limited herself to looking me square in the face with the utmost seriousness. When we were alone, she told me that if I didn’t participate in voluntary work, I would be reported to the school; this failure to participate would also be taken into account when evaluating my work at the end of the course.

Likewise, my wage for the following school year would depend on that evaluation. When I told the story to my parents, they gave me a hard time; they told me that I shouldn't refuse when they called on me do voluntary work, adding that such an attitude could harm me in the future when I looked for another job.

When a person requests employment in certain fields (like higher education, the press or even tourism), their social conduct on the block where they live is checked. In this verification, it's not enough that a person has had no problems with the law, or that they've respected others and have been a hard-working and disciplined person – it's also necessary to know if they belong to the CDR.

In fact, the person responsible for this verification visits the CDR president to pose certain questions: Does the person do CDR block watch? Do they participate in voluntary work? Do they relate well with the neighbors? If you're not a CDR member, or any of the other answers are negative, the possibility of you obtaining the position you've requested can shrink.

But that generally doesn't happen; people try to avoid such problems, so they participate in voluntary work, which -after all- is not done every day and nor is it that demanding.

The Reason Has Changed

The main function of voluntary work has ceased being a "disinterested contribution to society"; instead, it has now become a mask that's necessary to wear, a kind of a protection.

I've seen voluntary work where people only clean in front of their house, though it was already clean, or they stand around on the sidewalk with a broom, since there was nothing to do. This stems from the fact that the work is summoned at the national level or is decided on in honor of some historic date. Sometimes people don't even know the reason for the voluntary workday, but what's critically important is that other people see them there.

He established that for this work, performed outside the regular workday, no type of remuneration was to be received. He should have also specified that the lack of willingness to perform this labor would not result in any type of coercion or punishment, or alternately that people should not expect any types of perks or preferential treatment for carrying it out. Otherwise, to what degree is that work really voluntary or - especially- disinterested?

Sara Gomez's 1973 documentary "Sobre Las horas extras y el Trabajo voluntario" (On extra hours and voluntary work) reflects the commitment that was felt by people toward this practice in the first decades of the Revolution. Many people donated thirty or more hours a month in the factories in which they worked.

For these extra hours that they worked, they accumulated merits, which could then embroil them in controversy around their earning some type of appliance at their workplaces. The documentary also shows that often these extra hours represented an expense in electricity which exceeded any benefit obtained.

Likewise, in several cases the work day was frittered away by those who received pay for it, though later these same workers earned merits for their extra hours.

Many women worked the entire week at their workstations, and on Sundays they sacrificed being with their husbands and children to carry out volunteer work.

In the documentary, one of these women talked about one experience when they were taken by truck to a place where there were some stones, and they were directed to move them to a different place. The next

volunteer workday consisted of moving those same stones to a different place, because they were in the way. The women were directed to move these stones on several Sundays until they were finally instructed to return them to the original place they had moved them from the first time. At the end, the woman only asks that the coordinators not make them waste their time.

Without Fear or Opportunism

Around four months ago, I performed garbage collection in the Alamar neighborhood with an artist friend. The amount of garbage strewn about the streets of our city is something that I'm concerned about, and I feel that it is not enough to write about this. Sometimes it's necessary to do something. I've also gotten involved in planting ornamental trees in the Electrico municipality on the outskirts of the city with another friend.

These were nothing other than acts of volunteer labor, for which I will receive no money or medals – nor does that interest me. I have realized that the idea of voluntary work is something grandiose, beyond ideology and political intentions. I'm not an admirer of Che – I can't avoid certain reservations about the idea of producing humans.

I deeply respect individuality, free alternatives and actions, even the freedom to do nothing. But when participating -of my own will- in the activities I mentioned, I felt it was worthwhile in doing such volunteer labor when it was really voluntary and the objective was to do something useful, without fear or opportunism behind it.

A few days ago, I heard a high school teacher question the mother of a student because he had not participated in "his turn" at doing voluntary labor that weekend.

"Class attendance and punctuality during the week are obligatory, as are weekend activities. And students' attendance in these is evaluated. Don't complain if at the end of the course your son receives a bad evaluation," the teacher told the student's mother.

The teacher's arguments were very convincing and I'm sure that the student won't miss any more work or obligatory volunteer activity on the weekend. What will in fact be missed, perhaps for his whole life, is the true meaning of voluntary work.