

The Gun and the Machete

Dave Wheeler

1970

Note: The following article was received from a long-time friend and frequent contributor to the Fifth Estate who is presently in Cuba with the Venceremos Cane Cutting Brigade. Future issues will carry further reports of the Brigade's activities. The paragraphs in italics [and quotation marks in web archive version] are portions of a speech to the cane cutters by Fidel Castro.

In the first stage of the revolutionary struggle in Cuba, guerrilla fighters roamed the mountain areas of the Sierra Maestre engaging in political armed struggle with government troops at every opportunity. Their lives depended on their feet and their guns.

Che Guevara's submachine gun became the symbol of the revolutionary struggle for independence and socialism. This stage of the struggle, before the peasant army swept down from the hills and took power in January 1959, in Havana, has since been termed "The Rebellion" by Fidel Castro and the Cuban Government.

"These are two historic charges: the machete charge of the mambises and the 1970 charge, which is the machete charge of the 10 million-ton harvest. From now on, the machete will become proportionately less important; it will lose its significance, until the day comes when it will be placed in the historical museum of the nation."

The past ten years in Cuba have been the period of the development of the revolution. The revolutionary Cubans have been faced with the tremendous tasks of realizing the potential of the revolution in an underdeveloped country and at the same time defending their country and their revolution from the repeated efforts of the imperialists to bring it down.

This has been the stage of economic development to secure the Cuban revolution. The symbol of this stage is the machete, used to harvest the sugar cane, Cuba's primary crop. This year's zafra, or harvest, of the ten million tons of cane is the culmination of this stage of development.

For, with the income from the ten million ton harvest, Cuba will begin to mechanize her economy. The zafra of 1970 will remove Cuba's traditional dependency on its primary crop, sugar cane, by producing enough to finance the first stages of industrialization. The whole population is mobilized behind this effort because it is clear to all the people how this will affect the country's future. Los diez millones van!

"Cane has always been cut by hand, ever since it was brought to this country. It was cut by hand by slaves. Later on, it was cut by slaves of another type—men who, if they didn't cut cane would starve along with their families since they had no other way out.

"With the revolution, new conditions were created. Now nobody must work because he would otherwise starve to death or would have no money to buy medicines for his family."

It's a long way from Detroit to this campamento in Havana Province. Not just the bus and boat trip, which took a week. But here we live in a tent city; eat cafeteria-style in the huge thatched-roof dining hall;

have Latin music; the Beatles and the Temptations playing everywhere over the loudspeakers—and we cut cane. Just as in all the other “campamentos de macheteros” across the island.

It’s strange working here for socialism and for the revolution. It’s a funny feeling to get satisfaction from working a long, hot day in the fields. But that’s because this is a mobilization of the country’s energies, not the alienated wage-slave labor I was doing in that fuckin’ auto plant in Detroit.

Can you dig working without a boss? Can you dig setting your own goals instead of having the relentless production line decide for you?

This is the way machetero (cane-cutter’s) brigades operate. Everything is decided collectively. In the fields we decide who does the job of cutting, who does the job of piling the cut cane. We set our own goals for our contribution to the ten million ton harvest. And we are learning Spanish and arguing politics with the young Cuban communists assigned to work with our brigade.

The Cubans share with us a will to see the full ten million tons come in this harvest. This is the basis of the unity within the Venceremos Brigade. This is the basis of our solidarity With the Cubans—commitment to the zafra as a primary aspect of their revolution.

We have production meetings every week. “Norms” and “quotas” used to get me up-tight because they always came down from the production office over the factory in the form of speedups.

But the revolution has done away with the bureaucracy. And so I was very surprised this week to hear myself proposing that we begin volunteer extra work for a few hours each week to boost our production record.

It is impossible to just put in your time for the revolution. For the revolution is a political struggle. And you have to choose sides. So people must be clear about why they act. This is why the situation is revolutionary—this is the energy that moves the revolution.

“It is easy enough to say that today we are the owners of the mills, of our mines and our land, of our resources. This is easy enough to state but how much more difficult it was for a nation with a large percentage of persons who could not even write their own names, with only a minute number which had only a sixth grade education, to attain all this.”

What the whole thing comes down to is called, in Spanish, concientizacion, which unifies the concept of consciousness, the knowledge to act, and the conscience, the ability to act. What a great word!

And what the whole thing comes down to is this middle-aged worker that a New York girl and I talked to in the fields. It was our first day in camp and we went to explore the acopio, cane-conditioning center; near the camp.

The man was working almost alone finishing up this one field. We asked him if we could watch, but he came over and began talking in fast Spanish right away.

“You’re from the Venceremos Brigade? That’s very good. I heard over the radio you were coming, but I didn’t know you were already here.

“We’re-so glad to have North Americans down here fighting for our revolution. The first brigade worked very hard and left with a very good record.

“The revolution is a great thing for Cuba. I was a campesino (peasant) before the revolution. I joined the army about a year before Havana. I remember families living under the bridges in Havana, people living in the parks, beggars everywhere. Now everyone is living better.

“They have medicines and now everyone can read and write.

“I read in the papers how brave young North Americans were facing armed troops with only sticks and stones. They must be very brave. You Will be very powerful when you take up arms in your country.”

We saluted and he walked back to the field. He was an oil worker who was doing volunteer work for the harvest.

“Undoubtedly, our successes will make fools of imperialism and its criminal blockade. The undeniable reality is that while we are advancing toward a great historical production goal, in the other countries of Latin America, where the infamous Alliance for Progress was presented as the panacea for their problems, the Yankee proconsul finds it practically impossible to pay a ‘friendly’ visit.”

“The time has come to end this meeting, for it is time to go out to the canefields. There is just one thing that should be emphasized. This sugar harvest begins today and will not end until the last sack of sugar for the ten million tons has been produced (Applause.)

“Patria o muerte! Venceremos!”

fifth Estate

Dave Wheeler
The Gun and the Machete
1970

<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/104-april-30-may-13-1970/the-gun-and-the-machete>
Fifth Estate #104, April 30-May 13, 1970

fiftheastate.anarchistlibraries.net