

Sugar, Sugar

Fifth Estate Collective
Various Authors

1970

I wonder how Alfredo is taking it—not making the 10 million that is. We all worked hard to reach that goal: 10 million tons of sugar, the largest in Cuba’s history. In March and April, when we were cutting cane together, everyone was certain that the goal would be reached. Now it’s certain that the 10 million tons will not be reached. The harvest ended with less than 9 million tons completed. Why? What happened?

“The plan for the 10 million was not a whim or the desire to set ourselves goals, it was the result of a real need.”

Fidel said that, on May 20th—when he made a report to the people of Cuba about the 10 million harvest and announced that the 10 million tons couldn’t be reached. He made no excuses, saying it was a failure of the leadership and not of the Cuban people.

There was a real economic basis for setting the goal of 10 million tons of sugar in 1970. Consider the following facts:

“Cuba is a small island and needs to acquire many things through trade. Cuba lacks many important resources, such as oil, needed for technical and industrial development.

“Cuba has been a poor nation, part of the ‘underdeveloped’ region of the world.

“Cuba has suffered an economic blockade, imposed by the US, which has affected trade with many countries.

“Cuba’s imports, now mostly from socialist countries, must be paid for through exports of some kind. Cuba’s import needs are growing rapidly as a result of the development programs of the Revolution.”

All this added up to one economic fact. Exports had to be increased, quickly. The answer was sugar—10 million tons of it.

In socialist Cuba the economic meaning of the 10 million tons took on political meaning. It represented Cuba’s effort to develop free of foreign (US) control of her economy—indeed, in spite of US efforts to sabotage their revolution.

The 10 million tons became international—Cubans, Vietnamese, Koreans, Bulgarians, Rumanians, Russians, North Americans, Puerto Ricans, Germans, Japanese, and other Latin Americans met in the cane-fields of Cuba. All were there because they knew what they were doing was part of the world-wide struggle against US imperialism.

The people’s response was tremendous. Fidel said:

“The people have more than measured up to the ten million and to eleven million as well. We [the administrative apparatus and the leaders] are the ones who haven’t measured up to the ten million. And I think we must say this as a matter of elementary justice, because it is the plain truth.”

Many factors were crucial to a successful harvest: enough sugar cane had to be planted; enough cane had to be cut and hauled to the mills; the mills had to grind enough cane; and the “yield” (the percentage of pure sugar extracted from the cane) had to be high enough.

All this meant that millions of people had to work extra hard to fulfill the goal, and complicated tasks of organization and coordination of tools, machinery, manpower, and-transportation had to be solved.

The human effort was successful.

The agricultural effort was successful. The 10 million tons failed because the grinding of the cane and the sugar yield were unsuccessful.

Problems arose with new, untested equipment. There were difficulties when equipment, ordered from European capitalist nations last year arrived late in Cuba or had to be reordered. In addition, there was improper maintenance of equipment in the mills. Finally, there was inefficient management of some sugar mills.

In the end, it was the industrial side of the sugar process, not the agricultural side, which proved to be the cause of the failure to reach 10 million tons. This was precisely the area where Cubans had the least experience.

“And it goes without saying that our position from the very beginning—the very beginning—was that if the estimates at any time showed that we would not be able to reach the ten million tons we would immediately report this to the people, because not doing so, keeping alive the illusion of the ten million tons in order to get the workers to work with a maximum degree of enthusiasm would not be moral or honest or in accord with the revolutionary principles that should be maintained.”

Fidel said that, too. The 10 million harvest was scheduled to end July 15, 1970. Fidel’s report to the nation that the goal would not be met was made on May 20th—in this report he disclosed that the earliest that anyone knew it would be impossible to reach the 10 million was May 7th. His report explained the history of the 10 million tons goals and gave a detailed account of problems in the mills which led to the failure. Probably never in history has a leader been so frank and straight-out about an embarrassing setback.

Having worked with the Cubans, I’m sure they feel the way Fidel does. I’m sure Alfredo feels that way. Sure, they are sorry that they didn’t make it—it was a failure and a setback. But that doesn’t mean total defeat. True revolutionaries learn from their failures—they learn how to improve their work, their sense of responsibility, their duty and dedication to the revolution. This is what Fidel, speaking with the Cuban people, means when he says to Turn the Setback Into a Victory!

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See “Cuba,” FE #110, July 23-August 5, 1970.



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