

Venceremos

Carl Jordan

1969

PRENSA LATINA—When asked “why did you come to Cuba” one black youth from Detroit answered earnestly: “To meet the beautiful Cuban people and help them with their harvest.” His friend, also from Detroit said: “To mix with the people and to get the truth of what’s happening here.”

“De pieeee...” followed by its English equivalent, “On your feeet...” comes through the loudspeaker and echoes across the cane fields.

Then come the strains of Guantanamera and more than two hundred and fifty Americans “hit the deck.”

It’s six o’clock in the morning and the sun is a little above the horizon. The place is a camp for American volunteer cane cutters less than a two hour drive from Havana.

The young Americans who make up the “Venceremos” (We will win) Brigade come from all over the United States. Some are only sixteen years old and most are in their early twenties. The oldest member of the Brigade, a white haired man from San Francisco, is over sixty.

15 people in the Brigade are from the Detroit area, including Fifth Estate staff member Rick London.

The contingent came by plane from Mexico in three flights about four days apart at the end of November. By coming to Cuba without the permission of the United States Department of State these young people broke the political sound barrier and produced a sonic boom that rocked Washington policy makers who have sought so long and so hard to isolate the American people from Cuba.

The arrival of the Americans and their participation in the Cuban Zafra (harvest) represents one of the most dramatic and formidable “people to people” projects in American history.

The young Americans arrived at the Jose Marti International Airport near the city of Havana. They were ushered into a big modern lounge to rest after the flight and to have a sandwich and grapefruit juice.

The authorities went through the documents and those who had not had their smallpox vaccinations were sent then into another room to receive their shots. Meanwhile, a guitar trio played and sang to the group in the lounge.

White, sixteen year old Susan from Ohio chimed in “This is the most out of sight country in the world.” Betty from Michigan declared: “I came for knowledge—political, cultural and social.”

From the airport the groups, which came in several days apart, drove by bus to the “campamento”. The big billboard with the slogan “We are with Vietnam” attracted a lot of attention.

The second group to arrive was met at the camp by the cheers of the first group which had been there several days and had already cut and stacked cane twice.

One of the boys of the first group, dressed in work clothes commented: “I feel like an old veteran here.” In their turn the third group was met by a cheering second and first group when they arrived at the camp.

The approach to the camp is a straight red dirt road which cuts between the cane fields. To your back as you enter are a row of hills in the distance, which gives the impression that you are in a valley.

The campamento has several dozen structures. The biggest ones are the recreation center and the dining room. Both have cement floors with thatched roofs supported on pillars. They have no outside walls, which make them comfortable even when the hot semi-tropical sun is beating down.

The dining room has a seating capacity of more than 300. The recreation center is about the same size as the dining room. When the Americans arrived they found the recreation center equipped with a piano, guitars, harmonicas, a television set, chess games, books and a stack of the latest newspapers including the weekly English edition of Granma.

On arrival each group attended a meeting with the Cuban organizers of the project. The Americans were surprised to find the most up-to-date simultaneous translation apparatus.

Each of them was given a wireless receiver with an earphone. The interpreter was in a booth to the side with a big, glass window. When English is spoken it is translated into Spanish, when Spanish is spoken it is translated into English.

Javier Ardizones, the chief of the international relations section of the Young Communist League of Cuba and the director of the camp spoke about the meaning of the American presence in the Zafra. He said that it represented a powerful blow to America's efforts to blockade Cuba.

He stated that the Cuban Zafra of ten million tons is dedicated to -the heroic Vietnamese people and that by participating in the harvest the American youth are also helping to fight American aggression in Vietnam.

One of the Americans asked, "What is the meaning of the ten million tons to Cuba?"

Ardizones answered: "The ten million tons are necessary in order to build the Cuban economy and diversify it. Cuba buys its tractors, trucks, machines and chemicals from the money it earns from its sale of sugar. The markets for Cuban sugar are already assured. Now the job is to produce the ten million tons."

Later Ardizones told a reporter: "Their contribution to the cane harvest is important, especially from a symbolic point of view. We will do all we can to guarantee that our American visitors are healthy, that they enjoy their stay with us and that they learn the truth about the Cuban revolution."

The Venceremos Brigade lives in tents and sleep on doubledecker metal beds with beaverboard "springs" and thin mattresses. Each tent has a cement floor and lockers. Gravel paths crisscross the entire camp and in the in-between areas flowers, grass and trees are planted.

The bathrooms are of concrete construction and, for hygienic purposes, use French style hole in the floor toilet with two elevated foot stands and a running water cleansing system. The sinks are under narrow lean-tos with corrugated roofs. By their side are shower stalls with cold water.

The camp has twenty-four hour a day electric lighting and running water. There is also receiving and transmitting station for communication with Havana.

On their second day in the camp each of the three groups were taken out to the fields to begin their work. The Venceremos Brigade is divided into ten sub brigades, each with its own banner, a white flag with a colored dot in the middle. Each group marches out to the work site with their banner held high and waving in the early morning breeze.

Cane cutting and stacking is new to all of the participants in the Brigade: Motion pictures which show the correct techniques were shown to them.

The protagonist of the pictures is Reinaldo Castro, who a few years ago was chosen as Cuba's outstanding cane cutter. Castro is with the Brigade in person as a technical advisor. He gives demonstrations, watches the cutters and corrects their errors.

During the first days of cane cutting the outstanding worker was "Woody" a 29 year old black from San Francisco. On his second day he cut 5000 pounds of cane. Cubans consider this a prodigious effort for a beginner.

Woody, extremely modest, said jokingly after his success: "I guess that's my quota for the week."

Chuck, a twenty-three year old white from South Carolina with a Master's Degree in zoology commented, "I'm enjoying this experience. There are lots of people here with different ideas. I get a lot of it." He praised the organization of the camp and the warmth of the Cubans.

Between the morning and afternoon work sessions there is an extended rest period: Many of the Americans, judging by their first days in the camp, prefer to play basketball, volleyball or pingpong rather than take a nap.

The camp has its own doctor, nurse and infirmary. There is an ambulance standing by twenty-four hours a day, just in case.

One of the three older men of the American group, Morton Vicker of San Francisco observed, "I've never seen an operation better organized. Not a trace of bureaucracy..."

The tentative plan is that the Venceremos Brigade after the work in the cane fields change its status to that of tourist during its last two weeks in Cuba.

The approximately sixty young Cubans who are working side by side with the Americans in the Venceremos Brigade have already developed close ties with their American counterparts.

This is exactly the kind of thing that the United States policy makers have tried to avoid. On the other hand it is exactly the kind of thing that the Cuban people and the Cuban government welcome.

Editors' Note: A second contingent of the Brigade will be leaving for Cuba in January. Those interested in participating should call Ferndale People Against Racism at 399-9191 for further information or write to Brigade, P.O. Box 643, Cathedral Sta., N. Y., N.Y. 10025.

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