



Che Guevara and the Cuban Trotskyists

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Trotskyism in Cuba had a long tradition stretching back to the early 1930s. The Oposicion Comunista de Cuba had been formed in 1932 in opposition to the sectarian line of the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC). With a record of fierce revolutionary struggle during the revolution of 1932-33 and a membership peaking at around 500, Trotskyism established roots in the Cuban labour movement.

Suffering decline after the major defeats following 1933, it was only the revolutionary wave of 1959 which led to the re-founding of the Partido Obrero Revolucionaria (POR). The POR naturally supported the overthrow of Batista and the expropriation of Cuban and US wealth and property. But they criticised the Stalinist bureaucratisation of the revolution.

They argued for the freedom of expression and action for all revolutionary, working class tendencies which were committed to the unconditional defence of the Cuban Workers' State against imperialism. They wrote:

'The formation of tendencies and their struggle inside the workers' state and its political and trade union organisations is nothing more than the expression of the heterogeneity of the working class, and within this working class of the various interests and layers within which are expressed different solutions for resolving the problems of the transition to socialism. To try to smother these tendencies with the dogmatic and sectarian argument about an imposed supposed 'unity', with the absolute monolithism of an 'official line' dictated from above, would be to want to turn back the wheel of history so as to return to the conditions that gave rise to the dark stage of Stalinist repressions already condemned and transcended by the communist workers' movement.' (Voz Proletaria (Havana), No. 11, October 1962, p. 6)

The Trotskyists, however, were to be targeted by the Cuban Stalinists. Using the slanderous pretext that the Trotskyists were somehow linked with the Mujalistas, Batista's official unionism during his dictatorship of the 1950s, and that they were acting as provocateurs by agitating for an assault on the U.S. Naval Base at Guantánamo, the members of the POR were, at intervals, arbitrarily arrested, removed from their workplaces and transferred to other more isolated centres, while their newspaper and publications were intermittently censored.

From 1961 Guevara openly supported the repression of other revolutionary tendencies, including the Trotskyists who criticised Stalinism from the left. As he said:

'You cannot be for the revolution and be against the Cuban Communist Party. The Revolution and the Communist Party march together.'

The systematic arrests and imprisoning of POR militants began on 18 August 1962 with the detention of Idalberto and Juan Leon Ferrera Ramirez after distributing a leaflet at the Congress of Sugar Cane Co-operatives. Later that month the police banned a meeting in Guantánamo to commemorate the 22nd anniversary of Leon Trotsky's assassination. In March 1963, the Trotskyists endured a further series of arrests, which the POR rightly denounced as bureaucratic terrorism.

In August 1963 the POR, in a letter to visiting North American students, explained that to justify the repression against the Trotskyists, Che Guevara had repeated some old Stalinist inventions about the Trotskyists' role as provocateurs and as agents of imperialism.

The suspensions from work and the arrests and threats continued during 1964 culminating in early 1965 with the prosecution of a group of POR militants in Guantánamo on the grounds of adopting a Yankee imperialist orientation and of publishing falsifications and defamations in their press.

However, it was during this period that Che modified his attitude towards them as he personally became disillusioned with the Soviet bureaucracy and its ever more direct grip on the Cuban state apparatus, economic programme and foreign policy.

It was Che's personal intervention that won the immediate freedom of a number of comrades. Guevara, for example, visited Roberto Tejera in La Cabana prison after he had been sentenced to a number of years imprisonment and had him released the following day. Likewise, it was Che who intervened to save Angel Fanjul, an Argentinian envoy from the Posadist Fourth International, from a death sentence.

Furthermore, in Che's office in the Ministry of Industry, Roberto Acosta Hechavarría, a member of the POR's Political Bureau, held the post of Director de Normas y Metrología. Acosta never appeared publicly as a member of the POR. Che knew about Acosta's ideas but they maintained a tacit agreement not to discuss them. This however did not prevent Acosta's eventual arrest.

After Che's departure from Cuba in 1965 the Stalinists finally put a halt to the public activities of the Cuban Trotskyists. The security services put it to Acosta and the other imprisoned Trotskyists that they could be released only if they agreed to stop functioning as a party and give up publishing manifestos and their newspaper. Idalberto and Ferrera Ramírez formally agreed to give up their propaganda and activities as a party and all but two of the POR's militants were released.

Disgracefully, the POR comrades were abandoned by the recently reunited Fourth International. The United Secretariat of the Fourth International considered the Cuban CP to be 'non-Stalinist' and lined themselves up as Castroite cheerleaders. One of its leaders, Joseph Hansen, wrote:

'The meaning of the attacks on the Cuban Trotskyists is exaggerated and placed at the wrong door.'

Compared with 'Trotskyists' like these, Che's growing tolerance of the POR reveals a much better understanding of the real nature of Castro's Cuba.

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