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July 26th became a movement: The Cuban masses make history

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Members of Cuba's 26th of July Movement.

Today the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba is a museum and a school—fitting, given the Cuban Revolution's well-known commitment to education. But this was the site of a battle that radically altered the course of history on the island.

In the early morning hours of July 26, 1953, an "army" consisting of approximately 120 rebels (including two women, Melba Hernández and Haydée Santamaría) attacked the Fort Moncada Barracks, beginning the revolutionary process that would create the Cuba of today.

This group of young revolutionaries had begun organizing only a year before,

meeting in an apartment in Havana. Among them was Fidel Castro, who was only 26 when those meetings began; he was barely out of law school.

Their beginnings were as humble as their goals were ambitious. They wanted to oust the U.S.-backed dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and usher in a new era of democracy and people-centered development.

At the time of the Moncada attack, a simple accounting exercise might have suggested that the revolutionaries' prospects were not great. They had already failed to bring down Batista through legal agitation, and militarily they were vastly outnumbered. Some sources claim there were up to 1,000 soldiers quartering in Moncada alone. Batista's military was supplied by the United States government.

In fact, even the revolutionaries' immediate aim of capturing supplies was only partly successful. And in the aftermath, Batista's police and military forces lashed out with unprecedented fury. They fired at civilians in the streets, adults and children included. Civil rights were suspended. Revolutionaries were arrested, executed and tortured.

Nevertheless, the regime had been exposed, and the masses were activated. By 1959 Batista would be out and the revolutionaries would be in power.



Fidel Castro and Celia Sánchez.

Oppression breeds resistance

Cuba is a rich, fertile land that came under Spanish colonial control beginning in the 1500s. On behalf of the rising capitalist class in Europe, the colonial forces committed genocide against the Indigenous peoples, such as the Taíno and Guanahatabey, and forced enslaved Africans to toil on plantations.

The colonial society was as rotten as that of the U.S. South. Slavery was not abolished in Cuba until 1886, 21 years after the end of the U.S. Civil War.

Oppression breeds resistance. A wave of slave rebellions swept the island in the 1840s. One of the most famous insurrectionists was Carlota Lucumí, a Yoruba woman who led an uprising at the Triumvirato sugar mill.

Later in the 19th century, Cuban people were inflamed by the revolutionary writings

of José Martí, who—like Carlota Lucumí—is celebrated in Cuba to this day. They fought the Spanish from 1868-1878, from 1879-1880, and from 1895-1898. Independence came in 1902.

Unfortunately, the U.S. imperialists were against Cuban independence. U.S. military occupation began during the conflicts with Spain because the long-term goal was to make Cuba a U.S. colony.

These imperial ambitions were not secret. Speaking in New Orleans in 1858, Senator Stephen A. Douglas said, “It is our destiny to have Cuba and it is folly to debate the question.”

Meanwhile, the U.S. capitalists were buying up the sugarcane and tobacco farms along with mining properties on the island (iron ore, manganese, and nickel). The imperialists forced the Platt Amendment into the Cuban constitution, making subordination official. The Cubans had run the Spanish out, but Wall Street came in.

Batista’s Cuba of the 1950s was, unsurprisingly, a nightmare for the great majority; he was Washington’s hand-picked stooge. The capital city of Havana was a playground for the world’s rich.

Countrywide, per capita income was half that of Mississippi, the poorest state in the U.S. The average Cuban was living on 312 pesos or \$6 per week. Few rural areas had schools, and children often died early from infectious disease. Most workers were employed on the huge farms and were out of work—suffering from malnutrition and other plights—during the off season.

This was not a situation that could be tolerated. As Fidel Castro said while standing trial following the Moncada attack, “The future of the country and the solution of its problems cannot continue to depend on the selfish interests of a dozen financiers, nor on the cold calculations of profits that ten or twelve magnates draw up in their

air-conditioned offices.”



The Cuban revolutionaries learned guerrilla tactics from Spanish Civil War veteran Colonel Alberto Bayo (right).

Zig-zags of the revolution

The revolutionaries were forced into retreat after the events of 1953. Principal leaders like Fidel and Raúl Castro spent time in prison.

To some, this may have looked like the end, but the arc from then until the seizure of power in 1959 was one of deepening the revolution by building among the masses.

There was no straight path to victory, and no shortcuts, but victory would come.

The revolutionaries traveled the Western Hemisphere raising funds. They regrouped

in Mexico and underwent serious military training (along with Argentinian Che Guevara) under 63-year-old Colonel Alberto Bayo, who had fought the fascists during the Spanish Civil War.

They made blunders, as when they nearly drowned at sea and failed to successfully carry out a campaign when returning to Cuba from Mexico.

Regardless, throughout various phases of the revolutionary process, they communicated with the people via radio broadcasts. Resistance to Batista increased throughout the population.

Sympathizers distributed radical literature, despite censorship. Workers identifying with the movement carried out strikes in urban areas. Meanwhile, the ranks of the rebel army swelled, primarily with farm laborers. July 26th had truly become a movement, incorporating the broad, democratic forces of the society and giving those forces direction.

Writing in 1994, U.S. Marxist leader Sam Marcy observed: “The Cuban Revolution came after the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia and the revolutions in China, Vietnam and Korea. The industrial development of Cuba was greatly advanced compared to some of the other areas of Latin America, despite the constraints imposed by the imperialist control of ownership—and the poverty and underdevelopment of much of the countryside [...]

“It’s important to note that before the rise of the 26th of July Movement that launched the revolutionary struggle for power, Cuba had for many years had a strong Communist Party and trade unions that survived years of repression. [...] Objective and subjective conditions in Cuba had matured to the point where a strong Communist Party was possible.”

Indeed, in its archives, U.S. State Department writers soberly note: “In 1958, the

labor movement was a powerful force in Cuban society. [...] Almost all sectors of the economy were organized, with union members reaching nearly one million or one in five workers.”

The objective and subjective groundwork for revolution had been laid over a long period of time. Part of the July 26th Movement’s success lay in the fact that it was able to creatively fuse with these existing forces (who had their own internal dynamics and zig-zagging development) while bringing new people into struggle.

Thus, the 1959 victory was not merely a military one, and it certainly was not a coup d’état. The July 26th organization effectively built a peoples’ army that acted in concert with the broad masses. This explains why the Cuban Revolution was so profound, and has lasted to the present.



July 26th marked the birth of a mass movement for revolutionary social change.

Cuba and the global class struggle

Because the Cuban Revolution occurred after the October Revolution of 1917—and because it was based on the masses—it could only succeed by building socialism.

The new government was led by a Communist Party that resulted from the fusion of forces that occurred during the fight for power. They swept away the existing state machinery. They dissolved the old military and replaced it with a revolutionary army. They did away with the big landowners, capitalists, and foreign domination, to boot. They gave land to the farmers.

They set up popular Committees in Defense of the Revolution. They advanced the interests of women and LGBTQ2S people. They routed the racist structures rooted in the colonial past. They sent fighters to aid in the anti-colonial struggles throughout Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Cuba may be a small country, but its revolution has had global effects. The revolution has to weaken links in the chain of world imperialism.

None of this was easy. The U.S. attempted an invasion in 1961, and has used economic strangulation to try to kill the revolution ever since. The tactics have changed from administration to administration, but the goal is still to recolonize Cuba on behalf of the capitalists.

None of this has worked. Cuba remains a bulwark of socialism, despite being forced to make some concessions to capitalist markets in the long period of world revolutionary retreat, especially given the fallout from the counterrevolution in the USSR.

Cuba is a beacon for oppressed and exploited people. Cuba's medical internationalism during the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated an entirely different model of global development than the one pursued by the U.S. and its lackey states.

Cuba has survived and remained independent, 90 miles south of Florida. For all these and other reasons, we can conclude that the spirit of July 26 lives on.

And as the crises of capitalism worsen and increasing numbers of working class and oppressed people here in the belly of the beast turn to socialism, we can look to Cuba for revolutionary solidarity, as countless movements have done since 1959.

