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Cuban Popular Resistance to the 1953 London Sugar Agreement

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In 1953, faced with a catastrophic fall in the price of sugar, representatives of the major sugar producing and consuming nations of the world met in London to agree a mechanism for stabilising the international sugar market. Cuba was heavily dependent on the export of sugar and any change in either the price received for the sugar crop, or the amount that could be sold, had a huge effect on the island's economy. Despite having failed to diversify its economy into other areas to any great extent, by the 1950s Cuba had two independent markets for its sugar exports, one provided by the United States quota system and the other being the so-called 'world market'. However, when the political threat of a reduction in the US quota coincided with a heavy fall in the price on the world market, the Cuban sugar industry faced a crisis. Alan Dye and Richard Sicotte have examined the effect of the 1956 revision of the US quota on the political situation,[1] but it is also necessary to consider events in the rest of the world market to fully understand the nature of the economic problems and their political consequences in the years leading up to the Cuban revolution.

Not only was sugar vital to the island's economy, representing 80 percent of exports, but Cuba also was the world's largest producer, with an annual harvest in the region of 5 million tons. This made attempting to influence the market price an important policy objective, while the sheer size of Cuban production seemed to offer the possibility of success in manipulating the market to maintain price levels. The government tried to do this, first by a unilateral cut in exports and then through participation in the International Sugar Agreement, which attempted to restrict the amount of sugar on the world market by allocating a quota to each signatory country that was smaller than their previous production. This approach had been tried before in the 1930s with the 'Chadbourne Plan', when it had not been particularly successful as other countries, not members of the scheme, had simply increased their production and undermined the effect.[2] This time, however, 44 governments were present at the negotiations in London and the Cuban government, one of the most enthusiastic backers of the approach, had greater hopes that the sugar price might be stabilised.

The Cuban government, which had come to power in a military coup in March 1952, had more economic problems to solve than just the falling price of sugar. A report for the World Bank had recommended wage cuts, easier dismissal regulations and mechanisation of industry as part of a package to raise productivity and increase profitability by reducing the share of the national income that went to labour. Cuban workers had a long tradition of militant defence of their wages and conditions, and so any attempt to increase productivity – which would have resulted in increased unemployment and lower standards of living for Cuban workers – required an authoritarian regime capable of overcoming resistance from the trade unions. This can be seen as one of the reasons why big business in Cuba was initially such a strong supporter of the *de facto* regime lead by General Batista.

[1] Alan Dye & Richard Sicotte, 'The US Sugar Program and the Cuban Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, 64:3, pp.673-704.
[2] Oscar Pino-Santos, *Los años 50*, Havana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 2008, p.141.

Given the importance of sugar for the economy, any attempt to generally increase profitability could not succeed unless profits from sugar could be maintained, which in turn was dependent upon arresting the fall in world prices. The method chosen to implement the cut in exports, as required by the London Sugar Agreement, was to cut production by shortening the harvesting period. This served the double objective of reducing the amount of sugar on the world market, while reducing the plantation owners' wage bill because the cane cutters were only paid during the actual harvest. Such an approach, given the militant traditions of the sugar workers, would bring the Batista regime into direct confrontation with the sugar workers and lead to their biggest strike for 20 years.

As both the London Sugar Agreement and the sugar workers' strike of 1955 are largely ignored in modern historiography, this paper will trace the course of events and will argue that, in an economy dominated by an industry that was so dependent on international market conditions, the contradiction between the needs of capital and labour would give the Cuban workers good reason to support the revolution in 1959. Starting from a discussion of the detailed relationship between sugar price fluctuations and the crisis in the Cuban economy, it will be seen how this led to participation in the London Sugar Agreement. The fact that this in turn brought the government and employers into conflict with the sugar workers will require an explanation of Cuban working-class politics and traditions of struggle. Before recounting the details of the 1955 strike, the paper continues with an analysis of the US sugar-quota system and an explanation of the manner in which American domestic politics exacerbated the already grave problems of the Cuban sugar industry. It will finally be argued that the different perceptions of the sugar workers and their employers as to the outcome of the strike led to increased working-class support for the revolutionary forces at the same time as many capitalist interests became disillusioned with the dictatorship.

The Price of Sugar and the London Sugar Agreement

Between 1895 and 1925, world production of sugar rose from 1 million to 25 million tons, and Cuba, with annual harvests of around 5 million tons, was a very significant producer. This significance was reflected in the dominance that sugar production had within the Cuban economy, although throughout the early years of the republic US capital controlled the sugar industry and consequently the wider economy.[3] In the second decade of the twentieth century, a speculative boom known as the 'Dance of the Millions', largely financed by loans from US banks, had collapsed and most of the Cuban industry had passed into American ownership when the banks foreclosed.[4] While originally producing almost exclusively for the American market, the growth of internal production of both beet and cane sugar caused the US government, faced with an efficient lobbying campaign, to increase tariffs, thereby causing the Cuban share of the market to decline.[5] This in turn led Cuba to look elsewhere and, by the 1950s, about half of the Cuban harvest was aimed at the rest of the world so that the income from the so-called 'world market' had developed a considerable significance in the island's economic affairs.[6]

[3] Brian H. Pollitt, 'The Rise and Fall of the Cuban Sugar Economy', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 36:2 (2004), pp.319-48.
[4] Brian H. Pollitt, 'The Cuban Sugar Economy and the Great Depression', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 3:2 (1984), pp.3-28.
[5] David J. Gerber, 'The United States Sugar Quota Program: A Study in the Direct Congressional Control of Imports', *Journal of Law and Economics*, 19:1 (1976), pp.103-47.
[6] Marifei Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp.14-16.

The heightened international tension at the time of the Korean War had led to stockpiling of sugar – then considered an important strategic foodstuff – leading to considerable price inflation so that, by December 1951, the world price of sugar was 4.84¢ a pound, climbing to a brief high of 5.42¢ the following March.[7] This high price encouraged a vast increase in worldwide production, with new areas being turned over to both cane and beet farming; but, as there was not a comparable increase in consumption, the resulting crisis of overproduction led, within a year, to a collapse in the price to a mere 3.55¢ a pound.[8] At this time Cuba was producing 18 percent of the world total and the collapse in the market was disastrous for the Cuban economy. Cuban sugar farmers had played their part in the general international scramble to grow more sugar, and the 1952 '*zafra*' (sugar harvest) was the biggest in history, at over 7 million tons compared to the previous record of 5.5 million tons the year before. Unfortunately for the Cuban producers, however, of that 7 million tons they were only able to sell 4.8 million.[9] This posed a serious problem for the incoming government under Fulgencio Batista, for whom the restoration of profitability was one of the principle tasks.

The *Report on Cuba*, compiled for the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) in 1951, had identified the principal challenge facing the Cuban economy as low labour productivity. Its author, Francis Truslow, argued that increased productivity would attract investment, promote diversification and thereby reduce Cuba's dependency on the sugar industry.[10] Given the strength of the trade unions and the fear by most workers that the productivity measures proposed would be detrimental to their income and employment prospects, there was little possibility that the Truslow report could have been implemented by an elected government. Rather, an authoritarian regime would be necessary to enforce its proposals, which, at least in the short term, could only result in a considerable increase in the already chronic level of unemployment. The army coup that brought in the Batista dictatorship was widely seen in this light at the time,[11] and this task would be made very much more difficult if the still-dominant sugar industry ceased to be profitable. The approach adopted by the Batista government to dealing with the sugar crisis was in line with the methods proposed by the World Bank report.

In an attempt to cope with the immediate problems of the sugar industry, the government purchased 1.75 million tons of the 1952 *zafra* to be kept in reserve and off the open market, thus hoping to use Cuba's dominant position in the market to stabilise the price. The idea of a Cuban unilateral cutback in production was further extended by decree number 78, which ruled the 1953 harvest would be restricted to 5 million tons by shortening the length of time in which cane could be cut.[12] The tactic of restricting the length of the sugar harvest was designed to increase profits for the owners of the sugar companies at the expense of the workers. The sugar workers were only paid during the actual cane-cutting period, and therefore, if the harvest were of shorter duration, the wage bill would be reduced. Should the restriction be successful in raising or at least stabilising the price of sugar, this would maintain or increase the employers' income. Critics of the strategy of restricting production were clear at the time that only the sugar bourgeoisie could benefit from the policy of restriction, and it

[7] Raúl Cepero Bonilla, 'Política azucarera', in *Obras históricas*, Havana: Instituto de Historia, 1963, p.321.
[8] Cepero (1963), p.347.
[9] Cepero (1963), pp.329-30.
[10] Francis Adams Truslow, *Report on Cuba*, Washington DC: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1951.
[11] National Archives (NA), FO 371/97516/7 - AK1015/33.
[12] Clara Emma Chávez-Álvarez, *Matanzas de rojo y negro 1952-1958*, Matanzas: Ediciones Matanzas, 2007 p.16.

was portrayed as not being in the national interest.[13] This illustrates the contradictions inherent in 'economic nationalist' politics when the nation is divided into classes with divergent interests and, in consequence, there is no single 'national interest'.

As many of its critics predicted, the unilateral action of the Batista government was a complete failure, as other producing countries took advantage of Cuba's voluntary restriction to increase their output and the price continued to fall. The national income from sugar fell from $655.5 million in 1952 to $404.9 million in 1953, while the total wage bill fell from $411.5 million to $253.9 million.[14] Moreover, speculation, insider trading and corruption were rampant, with those who ran the Cuban Institute for Sugar Stabilisation (*Instituto Cubano de Estabilización de Azúcar*), all close allies of Batista, enriching themselves scandalously.[15] The British government also profited from the unusually low price of sugar, by ending sugar rationing at home and buying a million extra tons from Cuba at less than 3¢ a pound.

The chaotic situation in the world sugar market prompted the intervention of the United Nations. In April 1953, the UN invited 78 countries to send representatives to an international sugar conference in London, to take place in July of that year, with the intention of negotiating an international sugar agreement. The Cuban delegation was led by Amadeo López Castro, a close associate of Batista. The idea behind the agreement was to stabilise the price of sugar by allocating quotas to the different producing countries, which would, in the words of the agreement, "regulate the world sugar market and reach an equilibrium between supply and demand that would allow the price to be maintained between the limits of 3.25 and 4.35 ¢ per pound".[16] The Cuban quota was designed to allow a *zafra* of 5 million tons. In the event of the price falling below 3.25¢, quotas would be progressively cut to a maximum of 20 percent, by which point no further action was envisaged. The final agreement was signed in August by only 38 of the 44 participating countries, while the rest of the sugar-producing world – particularly Peru, Indonesia, Brazil, Formosa and East Germany – was not bound by the treaty.[17] Not signing the agreement and increasing production was only an option for smaller producers whose economies were not so dependent on sugar. This may have been short-sighted, but it represented an opportunity for growers in these smaller producing countries to gain an income they had not previously enjoyed. If Cuba had tried this approach, such was its importance in the world market its withdrawal would have destroyed the agreement.

This partial nature of the International Sugar Agreement was to be its undoing, as non-member countries could increase their production as much as they wished, while importing countries who were signatories to the agreement were not obliged to buy exclusively from other member states. Furthermore, the agreement only restricted production in exporting countries but did not restrict internal production in participating importing countries: a particularly important loophole for European sugar-beet producers. There were also two other important sugar-regulation schemes: the Commonwealth Preference scheme and the United States Sugar quota scheme. The latter accounted for about half the Cuban production, and would have an important effect on the situation in the second half of the decade when US

[13] *Bohemia*, 23 January 1955.
[14] José Antonio Guerra, 'La industria azucarera cubana: 1932-1957', *Diario de la Marina*, 15 September 1957.
[15] Cepero (1963), pp.310-12.
[16] 'Convenio Internacional del Azucar', *Gaceta Oficial* 7645, 11 January 1954.
[17] Boris C. Swerling, 'The International Sugar Agreement of 1953', *American Economic Review*, 44:5 (December 1954), pp.848-9.

domestic growers succeeded in reducing the amount of sugar purchased from Cuba, thereby exacerbating the problem caused by the reduction in income from the rest of the world market The Commonwealth scheme – which was designed to develop sugar production in the British Empire and which guaranteed an annual 2.5 million tons to Britain's colonies and ex-colonies – was an additional complication because it further reduced the potential market for Cuba.[18] Thus, Cuba faced an unfortunate conjuncture with falling prices due to overproduction and a reduction in the American and British markets because of preference to internal US and British Empire production. Meanwhile some smaller producers took short term advantage of the London Sugar Agreement's attempt to reduce the amount of sugar on the market and undermined the agreement by increasing their own production.

These defects became obvious from the beginning as the price dropped to 3.14¢ in November 1953, thus triggering a 15 percent drop in quotas as soon as the agreement came into force. The price continued to fall and in May 1954 another 5 percent cut in quotas was decreed by the International Sugar Council, but to little effect as, by June, the price had fallen to 3.05¢. The maximum cut in quota now having been reached, the agreement was powerless to act further, although the council did suggest a further voluntary cut.[19]

The failure of the London Sugar Agreement to achieve its objective of stabilising the world market sugar price between 3.25 and 4.35¢ per pound was to have serious political repercussions in Cuba, where opponents of the regime painted the agreement as an unpatriotic surrender to foreign interests.[20] It is difficult to see how anything the government might have done would have stopped the fall in the price of sugar, but the fact that they tried and failed left them open to criticism. However, the critics recommended approach, which amounted to little more than aggressively trying to sell more sugar on an unregulated market, risked a further catastrophic fall in the world price that could have bankrupted the country. Nevertheless, the fact that the weight of the measures adopted would fall most heavily on the workers produced a strong reaction within the trade unions.

Working-class politics

Cuban workers had a militant history, which included the general strike in 1933 that had played an important part in the revolution that brought down the dictatorial government of Gerado Machado. However, the main trade union federation, the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba* (CTC) headed by general secretary Eusebio Mujal, had become heavily bureaucratised and relied on government patronage to maintain its position rather than adopting more traditional trade-union methods of collective bargaining.[21] Indeed it is commonly recognised that Mujal played an important role in supporting the Batista dictatorship, and in return the government obliged employers to deduct trade-union subscriptions from workers' wages by means of a compulsory check-off. In return the CTC restrained and undermined workers attempts to resist the employers' productivity offensive and did their best to keep the trade unions out of politics. However, despite Mujal's best efforts, the CTC was not a monolithic organisation and Batista had not been able to corrupt the entire trade-union machine. As the political situation developed, the middle ground

[18] Swerling (1954), p.841.
[19] Arnaldo Silva Leon, *Cuba y el mercado internacional azucarero*, Havana: Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1975, pp.123-43.
[20] Pino (2008) pp.135-40.
[21] Hobart Spalding, *Organized Labor in Latin America: historical case studies of workers in dependent societies*, New York: New York University Press, 1977, pp.227-38.

between the regime and the resistance disappeared, forcing the whole of society, trade unionists included, to choose one side or the other. As well as some honest independent trade-union leaders, the communist *Partido Socialista Popular* (PSP) still had a level of influence. This was particularly true in the countryside where social legislation was not well enforced and, given that most urban bureaucrats avoided the rural areas, some militants, including communists, managed to gain a following among agricultural workers.[22] The nature of the economy meant that the sugar-workers' union, the *Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Azucareros* (FNTA), had always been the most important part of the Cuban labour movement. They had a long tradition of struggle and had even set up soviets and armed militias during the 1933 strike.[23] The seasonal nature of their employment militated against bureaucratically stable trade-union organisation, with membership numbers fluctuating widely according to the time of year, but this saved them from the dangers of conservatism that are inherent in traditional skilled trade unionism. Thus, for example, sugar workers had a tradition of cane-burning sabotage as a tactic for enforcing their demands. However, the fragmenting effects of the seasonal harvest cycle were offset by the fact that most of them lived in communities in which they formed the overwhelming majority, thereby reinforcing workplace solidarity with community feeling in times of industrial struggle.

By January 1955 the fall in the international price of sugar had produced an internal crisis in the FNTA. The government had restricted the harvest to 4.75 million tons in 1953, and a further reduction was under consideration for 1955.[24] In 1954, wages and conditions had been frozen to 1953 levels, perhaps to avoid trouble before the elections, but this was considered by the employers to be economically unviable in view of the fall in prices and they were looking for a pro-rata wage rate based on the price of sugar.[25] This produced an outcry, even from the moderate leader of the FNTA, José Luis Martínez.[26] An unusually united FNTA conference in January 1955 supported Martínez's stand, with more militant elements agitating for a strike.[27] Following a round table discussion with both the employers and the unions, the government decreed a harvest of 4.4 million tons and a 7.31 percent wage cut, which would result in a saving for the employers of 23 million pesos, 15 percent of their wage bill.[28] The decree also authorised bulk sugar loading, a measure which would have led to thousands of job losses. There was uproar in the FNTA conference, but Mujal persuaded the delegates to refer the strike call to the joint CTC/FNTA executive meeting. There, away from the pressure of the conference, Martínez and Mujal opposed a strike as impractical, saying that the FNTA was not prepared, with a final vote of 53 to 19 against strike action.[29]

This conference is the first sign of a developing schism in the CTC bureaucracy and the emergence of a left-wing opposition around Conrado Rodriguez, Conrado Becquer and Anibal Alvarez. Following the formal acceptance of the government decree, employers in the province of Las Villas started declaring mass redundancies and Conrado Rodriguez, the provincial FNTA leader, publicly accused Mujal and Martínez of betrayal.[30] There was considerable disillusion at this climb down, both within the rank and file and among a

[22] James O'Connor, *The Origins of Socialism in Cuba*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970, p.181.
[23] Barry Carr, 'Mill Occupations and Soviets: The Mobilisation of Sugar Workers in Cuba, 1917-33', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 28:1 (1996), p.141.
[24] *Bohemia*, 2 January 1955.
[25] NA, FO 371/108990 - AK1015/1&3 (1954), Internal situation in Cuba.
[26] Mario del Cueto, 'El problema social de la zafra', *Bohemia*, 9 January 1955.
[27] *Bohemia*, 23 January 1955.
[28] Pardo Llada, 'La pobre zafra de 55', *Bohemia*, 6 February 1955.
[29] *Bohemia*, 30 January 1955.
[30] *Bohemia*, 6 February 1955.

minority of the FNTA leadership, while the employers had been looking for a much greater cut in their wage bill.[31] The Ministry of Labour repaid the FNTA bureaucracy for their help in defusing the situation by delaying the scheduled union elections in which it was unlikely that any of the *mujalistas* on the executive could have retained their seats.[32] Feelings in the industry were further inflamed by reports of corruption in the sugar workers' pension fund, involving both the government and the FNTA bureaucracy,[33] while pressure increased when the American sugar quota was threatened with reduction following protectionist pressure from southern US sugar farmers.[34]

US sugar quota and the failure of a strategy

The United States had never been part of the International Sugar Market, having sufficient supplies from its own internal sources and from its client states such as Cuba and the Philippines. Following US intervention in the Cuban War of Independence, known to the Americans as the Spanish-American War, the island only received its independence in 1902 on condition that the new constitution contained a clause, known as the Platt Amendment, which allowed the US to intervene in Cuban affairs should it consider it necessary. This constitutional arrangement was accompanied by a Treaty of Reciprocity, which structured economic relations between the two countries to the advantage of the United States. In these circumstances, US capital had come to dominate the Cuban economy in general and the sugar industry in particular. Initially, Cuba had supplied almost the entire US market and then sold any excess on the world market, but the Jones-Costigan Act, passed by the US Congress in May 1934, imposed a system of quotas that were not mutually negotiated, but decided unilaterally by the US Secretary of Agriculture.[35] This reduced the Cuban share of the US market from 50 percent down to 30 percent. By the early 1950s the United States was only buying about half of the Cuban sugar crop; but the US quota system was complicated because, as well as its commercial function, it had a political dimension. So, in May 1955, following an aggressive campaign led by Senator Allan Elender, the US Senate passed a new 'Sugar Law', which reduced Cuba's previously held right to 96 percent of any increase in US consumption down to 29.5 percent, which, according to Oscar Pino Santos writing at the time, would cost Cuba nearly 100,000 tons.[36] This additional threat to Cuban sugar production, which occurred despite a visit to Washington by a united delegation of Cuban employers and workers' leaders of all factions,[37] served to increase anti-imperialist feeling amongst sugar workers.

These feelings reinforced working-class nationalist politics and gave credence to ideas of economic nationalism as a solution to poverty and insecurity, thus further undermining the credibility of the London Sugar Agreement, which was popularly seen as surrendering to foreign interests.[38] It has been common since the triumph of the revolution to assume that opposition to foreign ownership was directed entirely against the United States. However, it should be remembered that European capital held a significant minority stake in the Cuban

[31] NA, FO 371/108990 - AK1015/3 (1954).
[32] *Bohemia*, 24 February 1955.
[33] Sterling Marquez, 'Injusticia con el trabajador del azúcar' & Mario del Cueto Otro 'Escándalo en el Retiro Azucarero', *Bohemia*, 17 April 1955b.
[34] *Bohemia*, 26 June, 3 & 10 July 1955.
[35] Stuart Marshall Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, New York: Arno Press, 1976, pp.243-4.
[36] Oscar Pino Santos, 'La cuota azucarera de Cuba en Estados Unidos' *Carteles*, 13 February 1955 pp.46-8
[37] *Bohemia*, 14 May 1955.
[38] Carlos Casteñeda, 'Azucar: causa común de todo un pueblo', *Bohemia*, 13 July 1955.

economy, and this was just as bitterly resented when it appeared to threaten the perceived Cuban national interest.

As the failure of the London Sugar Agreement to prevent the continuing decline in sugar prices was becoming increasingly obvious, the government's inability to think of an alternative strategy further reduced its standing. Peru and Indonesia had refused to join, Brazil and Formosa were unsatisfied with their quota and left, while many importers were never included and the British Commonwealth received privileges that, given that London was the home of the agreement, served to further weaken the agreement's credibility. By early 1955, the price of sugar had reached 3.15¢ per pound, which was 10 points lower than the agreed minimum. Cuba appeared to be taking the majority of the restriction, with a 30 percent reduction on the production levels of 1952, the impact of which would be much worse if the US quota were to be cut further as now seemed likely.[39] The London Sugar Agreement appears from these figures to be working against Cuba's interests, but no viable alternative was offered at the time. At least remaining a party to the agreement maintained a level of profitability for the employers and, if this was at the expense of working-class employment and living standards, this was in line with the Batista government's approach to industrial relations in general.[40] Yet living standards for agricultural workers were already appalling. The figures contained in the 1957 report of the *Agrupación Católica Universitaria* are graphic: 64 percent with no proper sanitation, 43 percent illiteracy, 91 percent undernourished and so on.[41] Cuba's sugar workers therefore had little to lose and, while hardship does not necessarily generate militancy, when combined with a sense of injustice there is potential for industrial action.

Strike

As the 1955 *tiempo muerto*[42] progressed, workers at local union meetings started formulating their demands – a process that the authorities violently tried to intimidate up and down the country. The police attack on the workers of Central Washington in Las Villas was one example of many, but one which received wider attention because it was owned by Batista himself. When the Central Washington workers met in August 1955 to discuss the threat of 40 redundancies, the police attacked the assembly, leaving 29 workers hospitalised with gunshot and machete wounds.[43] The sugar workers responded by occupying the site hospital and began a hunger strike, while their families staged a sit-in, first of all in the school, then, after they had been ejected from there, they occupied the church and the *ayuntamiento* (town hall). Solidarity strikes spread through the region, and Becquer and Rodriguez – known as '*los Dos Conrados*' – occupied the church tower.[44] As the confrontation escalated, the Ministry of Labour intervened, conceded to the workers and the redundancies are withdrawn.[45]

In this atmosphere, the provincial union in Las Villas passed a resolution opposing the employers over the late start to repairs in the sugar-processing plants and the threat of ten

[39] *Bohemia*, 4 September 1955.
[40] Steve Cushion, 'Organised Labour under Batista', *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, 3 (June 2009).
[41] Agrupación Católica Universitaria, 'Encuentra de Trabajadores Rurales, 1956-57', *Economía y Desarrollo* (July-August 1972), pp.188-212.
[42] Literally the 'dead time', as the period outside the sugar harvest was known, when sugar workers had no income from their trade and had to subsist as best they could on other employment, subsistence farming etc.
[43] *Carta Semanal*, 24 August & 14 September 1955.
[44] *Bohemia*, 11 September 1955.
[45] *Carta Semanal*, 6 November 1955.

thousand redundancies, while rejecting what they saw as a return to 1950 wage levels. In November, the union's *plenaria nacional* supported this approach and demanded a five million ton harvest, an end to wage cuts and the restoration of the previous year's 7.31 percent cut, along with the reinstatement of all sacked workers, pay for '*super-producción*'[46] and derogation of Clause 4 of decree 3164, which allowed employers to leave vacancies unfilled.[47] They also raised the demand for full payment of the '*diferencial*'.

Before the start of each year's sugar harvest, it had been the agreement to pay the workers a bonus, known as the *diferencial*, based on the sugar price in the United States, which, because the US operated outside the world market, bore scant relation to the international sugar price. No *diferencial* had been paid since 1951, but the idea captured the sugar workers' imagination this year.[48] Alfredo Menendez, an economist in the Ministry of Sugar who was secretly a member of the PSP, used his access to the Ministry's data to calculate that the *diferencial* should be 9 percent,[49] although Conrado Rodriguez popularised the figure of 7.5 percent. The fact that confrontation should erupt over the *diferencial* highlights the gulf of comprehension that existed between employers and employed in the sugar industry. To the employers, the fact that the international price had dropped meant that they considered that they had a reduced ability to pay their wage bill and that a bonus that dated back to better times was unacceptable. The majority of workers, on the other hand, already living in conditions of miserable poverty,[50] felt that they were being made to bear the brunt of a crisis not of their making and thus the fight over the *diferencial* became hugely symbolic for both sides.

The government, with the support of the CTC bureaucracy, refused to negotiate, while the leaders of the FNTA denounced the workers' demands as unreasonable.[51] Undeterred, starting in Las Villas province, but soon spreading nationwide, five-hundred thousand sugar workers went on strike at the end of December and the union leadership, unable to stop the movement, tried to place themselves at its head. Then, following negotiations with Batista, the FNTA ordered a return to work on 29 December, saying that the government had agreed to their demands. Becquer and the opposition, calling themselves the *Frente Azucarero de Acción Sindical*, called for a continuation of the struggle as the government decreed a *diferencial* of only 4.02 percent,[52] which was calculated to be worth only 6 million pesos to the workers, considerably short of the 18 million pesos that it would have cost to pay the full demand.[53]

When faced with a level of repression only previously used to attack militant students, the sugar workers themselves turned to violence and set up road blocks, burnt cane fields and occupied town halls and city centres: actions that resulted in hundreds arrested or wounded,

[46] Superproduction is defined as the increase in production due to mechanisation. It was a common demand of Cuban workers in the face of such mechanisation that they be paid the same as before the new machinery arrived. This was strongly contested by the employers for whom mechanisation was aimed at reducing the wage bill.
[47] *Carta Semanal*, 23 November 1955.
[48] *Bohemia*, 1 January 1956.
[49] Interview with Alfredo Menendez, March 2009.
[50] Samuel Feijoo, 'Desocupación endémica, el ciclo del tiempo muerto', *Bohemia*, 7 October 1956.
[51] Conrado Rodríguez, 'La industria azucarera ha obtenido fabulosas ganancias', *Bohemia* 18 December 1955, p.71.
[52] *Bohemia*, 8 January 1956.
[53] Angelina Rojas Blaquier, *1955 – Crónica de una marcha ascendente*, Havana: Instituto de Historia de Cuba, 1998 pp.68-76.

with several strikers being killed.[54] In addition to a complete stoppage of the sugar industry, there were solidarity strikes on the railways and in the docks and, despite the official instruction to return to work from the CTC, normal working was not fully resumed until the 4th or 5th of January. This confrontation destroyed many illusions and convinced a significant minority of workers that there was no longer any reformist solution to their problems.[55] The violence used by the state against strikers had forged a bond of solidarity between workers and students as they realised they had a common enemy.

Students had been the only sector of society to actively oppose the 1952 coup and their opposition, as well as the consequent repression, had grown with the election of the revolutionary nationalist José Antonio Echeverría as leader of the student union, the FEU (university students' union). Police violence against the students came to a head on 7 December 1955, with an attack on a student demonstration in Santiago;[56] and the FEU called for solidarity from workers to be shown by a five-minute general strike on the 14th. Despite virulent CTC opposition, this short demonstration was very well supported, particularly in Havana, Santiago and Matanzas, indicating a growing disillusion with both the official unions and the regime. At the same time, it helped to raise political tensions and increased the self-confidence of the sugar workers. The FEU repaid this solidarity by sending student organisers out into the sugar fields to help the strikers. The support that they showed in the sugar strike gave the FEU enormous credibility amongst workers and the revolutionary nationalist politics of the student activists gained a greater working-class following. When a section of the trade-union leadership tried to publicly organise against what they saw as a betrayal, they were disciplined by the CTC bureaucracy and turned again to the FEU for help.

Becquer, Rodriguez, Anibal Alvarez and Jorge Cruz were removed from the FNTA executive and some provincial leaders were expelled, with the CTC using the police to enforce the decision. New officials were imposed by the Ministry of Labour to replace them, but in Las Villas and Camaguey no local sugar workers were available, so outsiders had to be used. Having been barred from their own building by the police, the opposition met in the parliament building, using Conrado Rodriguez's position as congressional deputy, and a clear majority of the FNTA executive attended. They declared themselves the real leadership of the union and proposed to go to court to establish it – a course of action that came to nothing.[57] Attempts to form a breakaway sugar-workers' union with the help of the FEU were equally unsuccessful as the Ministry of Labour and the trade-union bureaucracy worked together using the intervention procedures to isolate the opposition.[58] Becquer gave up the struggle in the official union and, by the end of 1956, had joined Fidel Castro's *Movimiento Revolucionario del 26 de Julio* (M-26-7) and went underground, working in Oriente province to build a clandestine sugar-workers' organisation in support of the rebel army.

The news magazine *Bohemia* argued at the time that the *diferencial* represented much more than the money, but was rather a question of workers' rights and social justice.[59] Although it was several days before normal working was fully resumed, the final outcome was a success for the government, even though many employers did not see it that way, expecting the complete smashing of all resistance. Thus the Economist Intelligence Unit,

[54] Julio García Oliveres, *José Antonio Echeverría: la lucha estudiantil contra Batista*, Havana: Editora Política, 1979, p.258.
[55] Pérez-Stable (1999), p.55.
[56] *Bohemia*, 11 December 1955.
[57] *Bohemia*, 15 January 1956.
[58] *Bohemia*, 22 January 1956.
[59] Andrés Valdespino, 'Más allá del diferencial', *Bohemia*, 22 January 1956.

having hoped in February 1955 that Batista "would override labour opposition",[60] expressed disappointment in February of the following year saying: "A strike of 500,000 sugar and dock workers was settled in the short term by a government decision in favour of the workers".[61] This clearly demonstrates the dilemma facing the Batista regime: he was not able to meet the employers' expectations of a destruction of working-class power because he needed the support of the trade-union bureaucracy, who could not compromise to the extent the employers required without losing all credibility and therefore their usefulness to the regime.

Outcome and the Frente Obrero Nacional Unido

The change in attitude of many trade unionists which came out of the sugar-workers' strike equally helped the M-26-7 with recruitment amongst disillusioned workers. The role of the FEU in extending revolutionary nationalist politics has already been discussed, but they were in no position to profit from it because, although the FEU's influence was hegemonic in the university, its membership was restricted to students. For those who wished to oppose the regime but who did not trust the communists or thought they were too moderate, the M-26-7 was the logical choice, not only amongst sugar workers but in other industrial sectors as well, there having been strikes in 1955 of railway workers, bank workers, dockers, textile workers, brewers and many others.

In terms of the relationship between militant workers and the M-26-7, therefore, it may be argued that the class struggle in 1955 was a crucial turning point. Up to that moment, *mujalismo* had, while suppressing their political aspirations, defended workers' wages and conditions adequately enough to neutralise organised labour and isolate militant activists.

The CTC bureaucracy's shameless support of Batista, despite the increasing involvement of the police in industrial relations, undermined the CTC's credibility and thereby allowed the M-26-7 to gain influence and important new recruits, particularly in Las Villas and Oriente. However, the importance of the support given to Batista by Mujal and the CTC bureaucracy cannot be overestimated. Control of the formal trade-union structures by its allies had given the regime a certain legitimacy in its early days, but the class struggles of 1955 exposed the inadequacies of the *mujalista* leadership of the trade unions and started the transfer of working-class support to the rebels. The defeat of the major class battles of 1955 proved to a significant layer of militants that non-violent trade unionism was no longer an option and, if they wanted to defeat the employers' productivity offensive, they needed armed support.

Starting in the west of the island, the M-26-7 built up an impressive underground working-class organisation, most powerfully seen in the Guantánamo region, where they organised several political general strikes in which sugar workers were actively involved. Thus, for example, during the strike which started on 30 November 1956, the workers in the processing plant of the 'Ermita' sugar estate, where the M-26-7 had two active cells, successfully attacked the police barracks on the plantation.[62] This combination of mass action with armed resistance and sabotage, called '*sindicalismo beligerente*' by its proponents,

[60] Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico', *Quarterly Economic Review* 9 (February 1955).
[61] Economist Intelligence Unit, 'Cuba, Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico', *Quarterly Economic Review* 13 (February 1956).
[62] Comisión Nacional de Historia, Departamento Obrero II Frente Oriental 'Frank Pais' (1980), Provincia Guantánamo, manuscript.

struck a chord with many sugar workers, who had a tradition of burning cane fields when they went on strike which went back to the 1930s.[63]

The Batista regime found itself undermined by this approach, while its bourgeois supporters became increasingly frustrated by the slow progress in achieving the level of productivity increases that they wanted. An example of this is the uneven and, from the employers' point of view, unsatisfactory failure to impose bulk loading of sugar in the docks because of the joint resistance of dockers, railwaymen and sugar workers.

In November 1958, following negotiations between the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera* (Workers' Section) and the PSP-controlled *Comité Nacional por la Defensa de las Demandas Obreras* (National Committee for the Defence of Workers' Demands), the *Frente Obrero Nacional Unido* (FONU – United National Workers' Front) was set up. This new organisation adopted a twelve-point programme that called for a 20 percent wage increase, opposition to mechanisation along with other measures against unemployment, an end to racial discrimination, more social protection for women, children and the unemployed, for the reinstatement of victimised workers, trade-union democracy and the end to the compulsory check-off as well as for the reinstatement of the 1940 constitution.[64] This last demand represented much more to workers than a desire for political democracy, as the 1940 constitution contained important employment rights that they had lost under the Batista regime.[65] On 8 December, Raul Castro, who commanded the 'Frank País Second Front' in the Sierra Cristal mountains, convened, in the name of the FONU, a congress of workers' delegates that endorsed the twelve-point programme as well as formally repudiating the *mujalista* control of the CTC, whilst adding to the list some demands specific to the sugar industry,[66] which were subsequently endorsed at the 'First National Conference of Sugar Workers in Liberated Territory' held on 20 and 21 December in the area controlled by Camilo Cienfuegos.[67] The report of this conference made a comparison between the years 1957 and 1951, which both had the same harvest of about 5 million tons, while the sugar price for 1957 had risen back to 5.2¢ per pound, similar to the price of 5.29¢ per pound in 1951. The profits declared for 1951 had been 106 million pesos but this figure had risen to 135 million pesos in 1957 while the total wage bill, at 321 million pesos, was 90 million pesos less. This was partly because of wage cuts and partly because increased mechanisation had enabled the same volume to be harvested in thirteen days less. The conference went on to demand increases that would compensate them for the loss and, symbolically, demanded a *diferencial* of 10 percent. It is significant that the London Sugar Agreement was given no credit for the higher international sugar price, rather this was attributed to the sugar workers' strike in Hawaii, a poor beet harvest in Europe, increased Russian purchases, increased international tension over the Suez crisis and a drought in Puerto Rico. So, while the agreement had probably prevented the complete collapse of the Cuba sugar industry and would have contributed to the price rise on the world market, by the end of 1958 very few people in Cuba were prepared to give Batista and his policies credit for anything. In particular, the sugar workers themselves had born the brunt of the policy and appeared in no mood to be charitable. The delegates displayed this mood by planning a national strike for the forthcoming harvest, pledging 20 percent of any wage gains to the rebel army and endorsing the strategy of the M-26-7 for a

[63] Carr (1996).
[64] Robert Jackson Alexander, *A History of Organized Labor in Cuba*, Westport: Praeger, 2002, p.161.
[65] Robin Blackburn, 'Prologue to the Cuban Revolution', *New Left Review*, 1:21 (October 1963), p.70.
[66] Pedro Cardona Bory, *Memorias del congreso obrero en armas, Segundo Frente 'Frank País'*, Cuba: Pilar Casada González, c.1995.
[67] Ramón Bonachea & Marta San Martín, *The Cuban Insurrection, 1952-1959*, New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1974 p.278.

revolutionary general strike supported by armed guerrilla action – a strategy that was now showing signs of success.[68]

The armed forces, while they had demonstrated ruthless efficiency when shooting down poorly armed students or unarmed striking workers, were not nearly so determined when faced with well trained and politically motivated guerrillas who rapidly gained the military upper hand in the second half of 1958. Bonachea recalls the parallel growth in financial support coming from workers through late summer and autumn, as well as the increase in membership of the M-26-7 *Sección Obrera*, which had an estimated membership of 15,000 by the end of the year.[69]

This effort bore fruit and, by the time Batista fled in January 1959, Fidel Castro was able to call a general strike to forestall the threatened military coup that, particularly if it had an honourable, patriotic officer at its head, could have split some of the middle-class support away from the M-26-7 and prolonged the civil war.[70] This strike also demonstrated the hegemony of the M-26-7 and enabled them to form a government without other members of the opposition, a hegemony shown by their ability to take complete control of the purged CTC, which went on to become the main mobilising force in the crucial first year of the revolutionary government.

Conclusion

The London Sugar Agreement of 1953 was signed to considerable acclaim, with only a few sceptics pointing out the possible dangers.[71] Cuban participation in the scheme might have seemed at the time the only way to maintain profitability in Cuba's main industry and principal source of income, but doing so required a severe reduction in living standards for the island's sugar workers. The fact that there was probably no other choice within the terms of the world market was irrelevant to those workers who saw the agreement as an attempt to maintain their employers' profits at their expense; an inevitable contradiction in a proposed cut in production when workers are paid by the hour but their employers profits depend on an internationally determined price. This contradiction expressed itself in an industrial dispute that ended unsatisfactorily for both sides. A combination of state violence and trade-union corruption prevented the workers gaining their demands, while the fact that the employers had to make some concessions caused displeasure amongst the owners of the sugar industry who felt that their profitability was being threatened. Not only were the workers being expected to sacrifice their already inadequate living standards in the interest of profit, many of the companies who would benefit were owned by American capital. Add to this that the London Sugar Agreement could be interpreted as a mechanism that mainly benefited the importing nations, and it is easy to see how this could be interpreted as a capitulation to foreign interests and give credence to ideas of economic nationalism. This interpretation was confirmed in the popular imagination by the cut in the US sugar quota. In these circumstances the patriotic politics of Fidel Castro and the 26th July Movement started to gain influence amongst the Cuban working class. In previous times, the Cuban workers had been able to defend their interests by traditional reformist methods of struggle, but these had failed when confronted by

[68] Informe de la conferencia de obreros azucareros convocada por el FONU (1958), IHC archives, ref. 1/8.15/2.1/2-22.
[69] Bonachea & San Martin (1974), p.263; and Alexander (2002), p.159.
[70] K. S. Karol, *Guerrillas in Power: The Course of the Cuban Revolution*, New York: Hill & Wang, 1970, pp.167-8.
[71] Swerling (1954).

brutal dictatorship that had both corrupted the unions and was prepared to use force to break strikes. This added considerably to the attraction of the M-26-7 as they provided an armed revolutionary alternative now that reformist methods had failed.

Two of the prerequisites for a revolutionary situation are the absence of a reformist solution to a society's problems and the loss of confidence in the system by the ruling class.[72] As outlined in the World Bank report, Cuba could no longer sustain its wage and employment levels within the constraints of the capitalist system and the government attempted to solve its economic problems by a drastic reduction in workers' living standards, which could only be achieved by the destruction of organised labour's ability to resist. The dictatorship's failure to deliver the required productivity advances lost it the support of the bourgeoisie, while the brutal methods employed in the attempt drove the majority of workers to welcome a revolutionary solution to their problems. The increasing military success of the rebel army through the second half of 1958, along with the progressive disintegration of the repressive forces of the state gave Cubans a stark choice; the fact that the workers responded with an overwhelmingly successful general strike when called upon by Fidel Castro in January 1959 demonstrates this.

While it would be wrong to propose a monocausal link between the London Sugar Agreement and the Revolution, it can be seen as a significant contributing factor, exacerbating the existing economic crisis. This did not make the revolution inevitable, but it did establish the circumstances in which the agency of sugar workers could operate and play an important part in the triumph of the revolution.

[72] Jorge Ibarra Guitart, *El fracaso de los moderados en Cuba*, Havana: Editora Política, 2000, pp.2-3.

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The mutually reinforcing relationship between 'commodities' and 'empires' has long been recognised. Over the last six centuries the quest for profits has driven imperial expansion, with the global trade in commodities fuelling the ongoing industrial revolution. These 'commodities of empire', which became transnationally mobilised in ever larger quantities, included foodstuffs (wheat, rice, bananas); industrial crops (cotton, rubber, linseed and palm oils); stimulants (sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, tobacco and opium); and ores (tin, copper, gold, diamonds). Their expanded production and global movements brought vast spatial, social, economic and cultural changes to both metropoles and colonies.

In the Commodities of Empire project we explore the networks through which such commodities circulated within, and in the spaces between, empires. We are particularly attentive to local processes – originating in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America – which significantly influenced the outcome of the encounter between the world economy and regional societies, doing so through a comparative approach that explores the experiences of peoples subjected to different imperial hegemonies.

The following key research questions inform the work of project:

1) The networks through which commodities were produced and circulated within, between and beyond empires;
2) The interlinking 'systems' (political-military, agricultural labour, commercial, maritime, industrial production, social communication, technological knowledge) that were themselves evolving during the colonial period, and through which these commodity networks functioned;
3) The impact of agents in the periphery on the establishment and development of commodity networks: as instigators and promoters; through their social, cultural and technological resistance; or through the production of anti-commodities;
4) The impact of commodity circulation both on the periphery, and on the economic, social and cultural life of the metropoles;
5) The interrogation of the concept of 'globalisation' through the study of the historical movement and impact of commodities.

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