

## **A Working-class Heroine Is Also Something To Be: The Untold Story of Cuban Railway**

### **Workers and the Struggle against Batista**

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When researching the biographical details of working-class women, we are not only faced with that “enormous condescension of history” that E.P. Thompson criticized when writing about the history of working-class movements, but we also find that working-class women are doubly “hidden from history” by the assumption that organized labour is male. This is particularly true for the railway industry, where the term “railway worker” conjures up a mental image of a burly train driver covered in coal dust or an engineer carrying a large hammer. However, in Cuba in the 1950s, important railway strikes were initiated by the predominantly female office workers. This paper will tell the story of a group of women railway workers from the central Cuban town of Camagüey, the principal hub of the railway network covering the eastern part of the island. Their actions, when they first heard of their employers’ intention to impose 20 percent wage cuts and massive redundancies on the train operating and engineering staff, were instrumental in launching a series of important strikes. Their involvement can only be traced because a photographer from the weekly news magazine *Bohemia* happened to be present and recorded the events.

Glimpses of other struggles in which women workers or the female relatives of male workers played an important role can be detected in much of the press of the period. As such the story of the railway women in Camagüey encourages us to look more closely into other working-class struggles to uncover their hidden participants and seek the contributions made by women. One advantage researchers have when examining primary sources in Spanish is

that all nouns have a gender and this can be useful for identifying groups of women workers. For instance, in the cigar industry, the workers who stripped the leaf from the stem were called *despalilladoras*, and we may identify them as women by the feminine ending. However, when men and women work in the same trade, the term for workers takes the masculine gender, a grammatical rule that can obscure the role of women. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, all references to “railway workers” must be understood to refer to both women and men.

During the 1950s, Cuba was ruled by the brutal dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista, who promised to create “a more disciplined and docile workforce” for the benefit of Cuban and American employers (Morley 39). This created conflict with many groups of workers as the regime attempted to reduce the share of national income that went to labour. Productivity was a particularly pressing problem for the Cuban railway company, Ferrocarriles Consolidados, which ran the network in the eastern end of the island. On 9 November 1954, facing severe financial difficulties and with annual losses averaging \$2.5 million, the company announced measures to reduce its wage bill by \$2.8 million by means of 1,550 redundancies and a 20 percent wage cut to be implemented on 1 December 1954 (*El Mundo* [Havana] 9 Nov. 1954). The office workers in Camagüey, mainly women, were the first to receive the news as they would have to administer the cuts (see figure 1). They immediately walked out on strike. Some went down to the depot and the workshop, where their action was swiftly joined by the drivers and engineers. Others produced leaflets and posters, and took to the streets of Camagüey in an impromptu demonstration, which received considerable support in a town that relied on the railway yards for much of its prosperity (“Los conflictos sociales”).<sup>1</sup> The wage cuts and redundancies were aimed mainly at the operating staff and so the actions of the administrative workers demonstrated a high level of principled solidarity.

As word spread, the action soon extended to the rest of the region, with a large street demonstration on 12 November paralyzing the centre of the city of Guantánamo, the eastern terminus of the network (*Voz del Pueblo* [Guantánamo] 13 Nov. 1954: 1). Following the strikes and demonstrations, the workers reported for work but initiated a form of go-slow known as *paso de jicotea*, literally “the pace of a turtle.” This caused widespread disruption to the railway service, reduced production in the workshops to a minimum, and paralyzed the administration (“Las condiciones”). Taken aback by the level of resistance, the government declared a truce, suspended the cuts, set up a commission of enquiry with trade union and employer representation, and gave the company a loan (*Voz del Pueblo* [Guantánamo] 19-22 Nov. 1954).

The railway workers were not idle during the truce period, having set up an unofficial propaganda and finance committee to coordinate the resistance to the wage cuts and organizing some short practice strikes in the Guantánamo region (*Carta Semanal* [Havana] 3, 12, 26 Jan. 1955). Having access to typewriters and duplicating machines, as well as the skills to use them, the women in the administration took a significant role in the production of propaganda material. When the truce ended on 20 January 1955, the company announced that it would withhold between 35 and 40 percent of the workers’ wages, suspend paid holidays, and take similar economy measures (*Voz del Pueblo* [Guantánamo] 21 Jan. 1955). Given that they would have to implement the cuts, the Camagüey office workers were again the first to learn of the company’s intention. Once more, they demonstrated through the streets of the city, loudly proclaiming that they would not implement the cuts (*Carta Semanal* [Havana] 9 Feb. 1955). The strike spread throughout the network, with many violent confrontations between the police, army, and striking workers, along with extensive solidarity actions by workers in other trades. In the nearby town of Morón, local bus and taxi drivers went on solidarity strike

and a women's support group was set up in the town (*Carta Semanal* [Havana] 23 Feb. 1955). We know of the existence of a number of neighbourhood support networks set up by the female relatives of railwaymen, who were helped by the women from the offices, similar to the Women's Support Groups of the British miners' strike of 1984-1985. Women's groups were also set up by the relatives of dockers and sugar workers during their own strikes in the same year. These actions by women were frequently a force for unity amongst workers of different trades as the women's groups were normally based in the areas where they lived and they were able to use their positions in the neighbourhood to build links of solidarity. As we shall see below, women also played an important role in publicly protesting the arrest of striking workers and similar repressive measures.

Many of the ports were owned by the railway companies and, during the February strikes, dockers in Boquerón and Nuevitas struck in support of their railway colleagues, as a result of which, 58,000 sacks of sugar lay idle on the dock (*Voz del Pueblo* [Guantánamo] 3 Feb. 1955). Other dockers in the port cities of Matanzas, Caimanera, and Manzanillo took advantage of the opportunity both to demonstrate in support of the railway workers and to express their own opposition to the mechanization of the loading of sugar (*Carta Semanal* [Havana] 23 Feb. 1955). The most significant public demonstrations of solidarity took place in Camagüey, where the provincial organization of the trade union federation, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba (CTC), discussed the possibility of a general strike, while many workers independently took part in ten-minute solidarity strikes. All this activity resulted in numerous arrests, in response to which the women of Camagüey organized a demonstration demanding the release of all prisoners (*Carta Semanal* [Havana] 23 Feb. 1955).<sup>2</sup>

When the sugar harvest started, Batista was concerned to avoid providing a pole of resistance that might inspire disgruntled sugar workers in a similar rebellious movement. The

government therefore decreed a new truce on 8 February, this time for one hundred days, funding the truce with another 700,000 pesos (“Trabajo” 13 February 1955). Once assured that further action was unlikely, the regime moved against some of the militants, with the Santa Clara courts convicting eighteen bus drivers and seventy-two railwaymen of taking part in an illegal strike. In June 1955, after the sugar harvest was safely gathered in, the government decreed a wage cut of 8 percent, imposed forced retirements, scrapped the collective agreement, abolished many bonuses, and lengthened the working day, as well as making extensive service cuts (*Carta Semanal* [Havana] 15 June 1955; *Diario de la Marina* [Havana] 8 June 1955; Zanetti and García 371). Within forty-eight hours, Guantánamo was again out on strike, quickly followed by Camagüey and Santiago, 10,000 workers in all (*Voz del Pueblo* [Guantánamo] 8 June 1955). The full force of the state now moved against the workers. The strikers replied by organizing a series of city-wide general strikes across the region, completely shutting down Camagüey, Guantánamo, Morón, Nuevitas, and Santiago. The bus workers in Santiago, Cuba’s second-largest city, who worked for companies that were owned by the FFCC Consolidados, also walked out and set up camp on the town hall patio in protest (*Carta Semanal* [Havana] 25 May, 8 June 1955). The police, army, and secret policemen started rooting drivers, engineers, and signalmen out of their houses and forcing retired workers back to work at gun-point. It was therefore difficult for these workers to take part in public demonstrations and pickets. In a pattern that was repeated in other industrial disputes of the time, this public role was often taken over by women, either railway office workers or the families of the strikers. Women proved to be particularly successful pickets, shaming would-be strikebreakers into returning home.

The CTC at this time was led by Eusebio Mujal, who had gained control of the federation in 1947 by a mixture of government intervention and gangster violence. In return for a

government decree making the payment of union dues compulsory, Mujal and his associates in the union bureaucracy became one of the Batista dictatorship's main pillars of support. In this case, he quickly reached agreement with the employers, despite the continuing strength of the strike and growing solidarity from other workers, and ordered a return to work (*Voz del Pueblo* [Guantánamo] 16 June 1955). In return for a few minor concessions, the union accepted an 8 percent wage cut and 600 redundancies, and signed a no-strike agreement, thereby placing the strikers outside the law ("Obreros" 28 Aug. 1955, *Diario de la Marina* [Havana] 7 July 1955). This was the signal for the forces of repression to increase their physical attacks on the workers and, amid the demoralization caused by the perceived sell-out, the strike was broken. In the days that followed, many of the leading militants were dismissed (*Carta Semanal* [Havana] 15, 22, 29 June, 13 July 1955, *Diario de la Marina* [Havana] 7 July 1955, *La Calle* [Havana] 14 June 1955).

This account of women's involvement in a railway dispute is perhaps better documented than most, but was not exceptional in 1950s Cuba. We shall examine some other industrial disputes of the period to show the extent and varied nature of this involvement. Following the defeat of the workers in many of the industrial battles of the time, this engagement led some women to take their resistance to dictatorship a stage further. We shall trace their contribution to the clandestine working-class networks that played such an important part in the rebel victory.

We have seen the importance of the women from the offices in launching the strikes and the significance of family members' actions in organizing support and solidarity. This role of organizing solidarity appears quite widespread and, throughout the newspaper reports of the time, there are tantalizing glimpses of the role of women in industrial disputes. For instance, we read in *Bohemia* of March 1955 that, in support of an industrial dispute, sugar

workers' wives and families occupied the company offices of the sugar refinery at Central Soledad in Matanzas province, but were dislodged by the army with several arrests. However, there are no further details, and it is probable that this event only reached the national press because the women's parliamentary representative was a sugar worker who protested about their treatment in Congress ("Trabajo" 20 Mar. 1955).

Detailed information on such local disputes is scarce, but Gillian McGillivray has unearthed some of the details of a strike at the sugar plantation of Delicias y Chaparra in the north of Oriente province. The strike started in October 1954 following an announcement by the company that there would be job cuts in the forthcoming harvest. A group of strikers occupied the town hall, but were quickly ejected by the Rural Guard. Women from the strikers' families, supported by the local branch of the communist women's organization, the Federación Democrática de Mujeres Cubanas (FDMC), then retook the town hall and held it. They also managed to intimidate the Rural Guard into giving them the keys of the union local office, which they then kept open throughout the dispute. This is an example of the frequent phenomenon where agents of the state were prepared to use a high level of brutality against male strikers, but were reluctant to beat women in the same way. Militant women were able to use this reluctance to the strikers' advantage. The strikers managed to organize daily mass meetings, despite the presence of Rural Guardsmen on horseback with drawn sabres. Dockers in the local port of Juan Claro refused to load sugar for the duration of the strike while women from dockworkers' families joined the women's support groups set up by the families of sugar workers. In confirmation of the role played by women in this dispute, a contemporary newspaper report also tells us that 200 women managed to prevent police taking workers who had been arrested to Holguin by train and also stopped would-be strikebreakers from entering

the workplace. Further, it was reported that the women's group went to the nearby towns of Tunas y Holguin in order to seek solidarity. The workers finally emerged victorious after an action that lasted 104 days (McGillivray 261-263; *Carta Semanal* [Havana] 3 Jan. 1955). There is also evidence of militant action amongst workforces that were predominantly female. For example, in Matanzas, the shop assistants of the Woolworth store were amongst the leaders of a general strike in the city called in solidarity with a high-profile strike at the Rayonera textile factory. Reporting on this action, *Bohemia* magazine refers to the Woolworth employees using the feminine *las empleadas*, indicating that these workers were all women. Demonstrating considerable bravery, these female workers refused to reopen the store in spite of the army's attempts to force them to do so ("Conflicto" 72).

Following the defeat of the railway workers, the year 1955 also saw many other groups of workers lose strikes to a mixture of repression and trade union corruption. However, everything depended on the sugar workers' union, the FNTA, which was the most important section of the Cuban trade union movement. At the end of 1955, seeking the restoration of a traditional bonus known as the *diferencial*, half a million sugar workers went on strike, with the women in their communities playing a role similar to that of the Delicias y Chaparra women the previous year. Despite a fierce battle, the strike was defeated by the now-familiar combination of government repression and betrayal by the trade union leadership. The defeat of some of the best organized sectors of the Cuban working class led many militants to reconsider their approach to defending their class interests. As Zanetti and Garcia contend, "Issues of a sectoral nature thereafter were subordinated to the need to solve the key problem of Cuban life: how to overthrow the dictatorship" (390).

In pursuit of this aim, a group of railway workers in Guantánamo joined the 26 July Movement (M-26-7), founded by Fidel Castro earlier in 1955, with the intention of initiating



an armed struggle to overthrow the regime (Coma 15-19). During 1956 and early 1957, these railway workers took the lead in setting up a network of workplace cells that, in protest at the murder by the police in August 1957 of one of the national leaders of the M-26-7, was able to spread a general strike from Guantánamo in the east to Camagüey in the centre of the country.

From accounts of participants in this strike, we know that the initial moving force were shop workers who closed down the commercial centre of Santiago, and we also know that 80 percent of Cuban shop workers were women (Torres 5-7). Photographs of the events clearly show the leadership role taken by women in the demonstration, which circulated round the city and called other workers out on strike. We have already noted that the police normally proved less likely to use the same level of violence against women that they showed towards men. When this proved not to be the case, the maltreatment of women roused greater indignation, as can be seen by the shocked reaction of the newly appointed US ambassador when women were attacked by police using fire hoses while they were attempting to give him a protest letter during a visit to Santiago (*New York Times* 1 Aug. 1957: 8; Ramos 25). We have no details of any involvement of the women from the railway administration in Camagüey in the M-26-7 workplace cells; a successful clandestine organization does not keep such records. However, given the enthusiasm with which they took part in the August 1957 strike, it is reasonable to assume that they were part of the clandestine organization.

The general problem for historians attempting to reconstruct the story of clandestine movements is particularly severe when investigating women's involvement, but we do have some accounts that can help us to understand the full part played by women in the revolutionary underground. The leadership role of women such as Vilma Espín and Celia Sánchez is well known and documented, but sources are scarcer for working-class women. One group

who have received recognition are the telephone operators of Santiago and Guantánamo, who secretly listened to police conversations and reported their discoveries to the rebels. We also have the recollections of Thelma Bornot, who worked in the US base at Guantánamo Bay. She relates how she was recruited to the M-26-7 workplace cell, and how she took part in the full range of clandestine activities, including illicitly purchasing arms from sympathetic US military personnel. Following the discovery of her revolutionary activities, she went underground and acted as a courier for the movement. As Bornot recalls, women often filled this role as they were less likely to be searched by the police and could pass more freely than their male *compañeros* (Bornot 185-200). Unfortunately for our study, there do not seem to be any published interviews with female railway workers; however, given their earlier actions it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the women from Camagüey were similarly involved.

Thus, while women only made up 10 percent of the Cuban workforce, and many of those were in the notoriously difficult organizational territory of domestic service, the comparatively few trade unionized women workers in the Cuba of the 1950s played a vital role in initiating and sustaining militant action out of all proportion to their numbers. The history of the Cuban insurrection would benefit from a comprehensive rereading of the sources with a view to unearthing the role of working-class women in the struggle against the dictatorship. We will surely find that many of the unsung heroes of the revolution were, in fact, heroines.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Many Cuban newspapers and magazines of the period were not paginated or, at best, erratically paginated, so page numbers are provided only when available.

<sup>2</sup> It was the custom of the newspapers of the time to make reference to the number of women arrested, as they were in the bank workers' strike in the summer of 1955 or the electrical workers' strike of 1957 (*Diario de la Marina* [Havana] 7 Sept 1955; "Obreros," 2 June 1956: 91-92). The fact that there is no such mention in the case of this dispute means that it is safe to say that none of the women were arrested.