

DIRECT POPULAR PARTICIPATION -
THE CUBAN ROAD

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Special for Prensa Latina

It was September 28, 1960. Fidel Castro had just returned to Cuba from the United Nations. His stay in New York had been dramatic. He had been forced to leave one of the famous-name hotels and had gone to Harlem where the Hotel Teresa welcomed him.

He was reporting on his trip, speaking to the people below from the north side of the Presidential Palace. It was a period of stepped-up counterrevolutionary activity in Cuba. CIA sponsored plans were already underway for the Bay of Pigs invasion. Castro told the people:

"We see shame but we saw honor, hospitality, courtesy and decency in the poor blacks of Harlem".

Suddenly the noise of an exploding petard was heard.

"A bomb?" Fidel asked, still speaking through the microphone.

The million people in the square below began to shout: "To the wall, to the wall!" and then switched to "We will win, we will win!". A few voices began to sing the Cuban national anthem and soon a sea of voices had joined in, ending with "To die for your country is to live". A group of people shouted "Viva Cuba Libre..." Fidel raised his hand asking for silence. He continued:

"Everybody knows who paid for that little bomb. They are the little books of imperialism".

He developed that theme and then said:

"We are going to establish a system of collective vigilance, of collective revolutionary vigilance. And then we will see how the lackeys of imperialism will move about --because one thing is certain-- we, the revolutionaries, live all over the city. There is not an apartment house, a city block, a

After the speech, almost spontaneously and without any more than the suggestion from the Prime Minister, vigilance committees were organized all over the country. It was only after these committees were an accomplished fact of Cuban life that they were formalized into a national institution called Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, known commonly as the CDR.

That was exactly ten years ago. A lot of history has passed under the bridge since then. Today the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution have almost three and a quarter million members, about forty percent of Cuba's population. There are a total of 67,457 neighborhood slabs.

Castro spoke to the tenth anniversary meeting of the CDR's in Revolution Square on the night of September 28. Close to a million people were in attendance. It was clear from the enthusiasm that the Cuban revolution has as much popular support as when the Committees were organized a decade ago.

Among the guests of honor at the assembly were the four hundred and six members of the Venceremos Brigade. They had just finished their one month of voluntary labor on the Isle of Pines and were initiating a two week tour of Cuba before leaving the country. During his speech Fidel thanked the members of the Brigade to the cheers of the Cuban multitude.

Castro told the assembly that the Revolution was entering into a new and "more mature" phase, that of "the democratization of the Revolutionary process".

For Cubans this was not a surprise. They had expected the Prime Minister to broach this theme that he has repeated in all his public appearances since July 26. He said that the CDR's along with the trade unions, women's organization and youth organizations would be given the responsibility to watch over the operational efficiency of productive centers, retail stores and service trade outlets. The idea would be to unleash the initiative of the people en masse to solve the problems with which the Cuban revolution is faced in these spheres of the economy. It was clear that the revolutionary leadership did not believe that solutions to problems such as absenteeism, efficient production and smooth service to the public could be solved by simple, administrative decree. The belief is

that only the people, through their own growing consciousness and mass participation can spot the errors, criticize, and initiate the process of finding solutions. The process of democratization, as the Prime Minister has defined it, means the involvement of the masses of Cuba in the solution of all the problems of Cuban society. It is the "mass-line" carried to its ultimate consequences. It is indicative of the tremendous faith that the Cuban leadership have in the people.

Until now the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution have had important, one can say vital, revolutionary responsibilities. They have played a decisive role in the struggle against the counterrevolution. They have pertaken in a thousand revolutionary tasks such as the anti-polio vaccination campaigns, school enrolment and attendance, voluntary work, activities during natural catastrophes like hurricane Flora of several years back, rationing, etc. etc.

Now, it would seem, they will be directed onto a new road: that of being the eyes and ears of the revolution around the local bakery, the radio repair shop, the grocery, the dry cleaners. All these enterprises in Cuba are nationalized, they belong to the people and now it will be the people, affected most by inefficiency, that will check up on them and find out how services or production can be improved. If the bakery does not have bread early in the morning the CDR will find out the reason why. If there is bad service in the neighborhood store, the CDR will try to correct the situation.

The philosophy is that no centralized administrative agency can do what the local neighbors can do when they are organized and given prerogatives. Just as the counterrevolution could not escape the vigilance of the people organized into committees in every nook and cranny of the country, so inefficient or dishonest managers cannot escape their notice.

In his CDR anniversary speech the new role of the Committees was only suggested and not analyzed profoundly. It is quite clear that the Cuban government does not want to make false moves in the serious matter of the democratic institutionalization of the country. They are proceeding

slowly and surely. The Cuban government is well aware of the atomic-power force of the masses in action and know that the road must be well defined so as not to waste that force.

Castro stressed the role of the worker's movement in more specific terms. Since his July 26 speech, the Prime Minister and other governmental and mass organization leaders have been concentrating on this very problem. The very day of the CDR anniversary, Castro had spent hours with worker representatives of thousands of minor industrial plants throughout the country listening to their criticisms and suggestions. Castro admitted that over the past few years the worker's movement has not received enough attention, that there was even an underestimation of its importance. Now it will find the road again and, Castro assured, Cuba would have a stronger labor movement than ever before in its history.

One of the innovations proposed by Castro and already put into practice is the election of trade union officers by the absolutely free choice of the workers. In the past, as is true in most socialist countries, there have been officially sponsored candidates that always win. The practice now is that the workers should choose whomever they want, whomever they have confidence in. Castro said that when they choose badly, when they choose an opportunist or a demagogue, it will be a danger signal that the ideological and organization work in that center of work has been deficient.

Tapping the energy of the masses and having unlimited confidence in them is not something new to the Cuban Revolution. It has been the principal theory and practice of the Revolution since its inception. In fact, it was the main guiding principle during the entire insurrectional period in the movement led by Fidel Castro.

Now, however comes the moment of finding the methodology and form for the institutionalization of socialist democracy in Cuba. Worker and mass participation will be the key. It will not be a rapid process because it is following uncharted paths. Cuba has rejected a formal

parliamentary system that is perfect on paper but in life does not allow for the total participation of the people in the management of the State and its different parts. The Cuban revolutionary leadership feel, it is apparent, that under Cuban conditions a form of direct democracy can be found. It is a path that seeks to crush elitist and bureaucratic legislative and administrative methods. It is one of the grand social experiments of our time.

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