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LOCAL POWER

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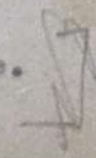
Cuba is still in search of institutional forms that will insure socialist democracy [in which the people's energies are harnessed and their initiatives utilized]. Rather than establish a hard and fixed institutional form, the Revolutionary government has been attempting, in the last eight years, often by hit-and-miss methods, to find suitable solutions in line with Cuban conditions. X out

One of the major tasks that the Revolutionary government has set for itself is the development of city and town government. Unlike the United States, with its long history of local government, Cuba, throughout the Spanish colonial and later U.S. semi-colonial rule, had an almost totally centralized form of administration emanating from the capital, Havana. Division of power between central and local governments was almost non-existent in an economic and political sense. It was said that if a dog did his "duty" in the street of a small town, a special order had to come from some ministry in Havana before it could be cleaned up.

Before the Revolution, the needs of the people of the towns and cities were ignored and the national budget, eaten into by corruption and robbery, never met the requirements of the communities. The money that did arrive at the local level was skimmed off by repairs and beautification of the wealthy parts of the cities,

by scandalously corrupt "public works" and by dishonest public officials. Playgrounds, parks, child care centers, maintenance of sewerage and water systems, the repair of sidewalks and thoroughfares were not considered financially feasible.

The need for effective local government multiplied with the coming of socialism. The majority of the stores and services passed into the hands of the State. Due to the almost total absence of local governmental power these stores, restaurants, laundries, gasoline stations and distribution centers were directly controlled and operated by the national and provincial levels of the corresponding ministries. The building of schools, sidewalks, nursery schools, was also totally controlled by ministries in Havana. This form of administration did not take into account the specific needs of the communities, nor did it allow for a system of communication that would respond rapidly to the suggestions and complaints of the population. Common sense changes in keeping with the necessities and desires of the community were often blocked in bureaucratic fashion by far off centralized government offices. Appeals to higher bodies were necessary if the town needed a new barber shop, park, restaurant or school and often the governmental offices in the provincial capital or in Havana treated the requests with a certain complacency. There was no margin for local initiative.



The need to decentralize this multitude of functions was quickly recognized by the Cuban revolutionary government. The development of a responsive and dynamic system of local government was considered the key to solving the problem.

On February 24, 1963, the first pilot plan for local government was launched in the city of Guines in the province of Havana. The city has a population of 50,000, a sugar mill and a large textile plant. It was chosen precisely because it was a typical city in which dozens of everyday problems were not being solved with sufficient rapidity.

On the basis of experiences gathered in Guines and later other towns, the organization of local government bodies was launched in 1966 on a nationwide scale.

The new institutions assure governments highly responsive to local needs and accountable to the town population.

The newly organized Communist party had a leading role in the establishment and orientation of these first town and city governments. The president of the municipal government was chosen by an assembly of local party militants.

This first step was followed by other assemblies in all the work centers of the locality and the election by popular vote of delegates (1 for every 100 workers) to the municipal administration.

Every six months a town meeting is held (in the large cities there are neighborhood meetings) in which the municipal officials "give account" of their work and receive suggestions and criticisms from the floor.

The delegates, chosen by their fellow workers for a term of one year, continue to work in their farms, factories and offices as usual, dedicating their spare time to their governmental responsibilities. They do not receive any monetary compensation for their community work. This fact makes impossible the growth of a group of professional bureaucrats, politicians or pie-cards in the municipal government.

The second round of election of community representatives was in just held early September. In the later half of the month town meetings will be convened all over the country to assess the work of the previous administration and to orient the new one.

A specific example of popular participation in the election of delegates is that of the region of Ariguanabo in the province of Havana. In the 1966 elections, 199 assemblies were held in the work centers of this industrialized region. Twenty-six thousand of a total of 30,368 workers (about 86%) participated in the elections, as did 4,340 of the 5,053 farms and agricultural workers. Of the 331 delegates elected, 199 are factory and office workers, 85 are agricultural workers, and 47 are small farmers.

Local government has already begun to solve a multitude of community problems in Cuba. For instance, the mining town of Moa, so neglected by its former owners, the Freeport Sulphur Company, has an ambitious program. It has finished a seafood restaurant, a recreation center, ~~and~~ a cafeteria in the nickel plant, a modern school and has put down 40,000 square meters of streets. There are plans for building 400 new houses (more than 100 of which have already been built), another school and recreation center, more sidewalks, a slaughter house, a large child-care center, a sports field, a cemetery, an aqueduct and a hotel. The town government looks after the proper distribution of food, regulates rationing and assures the efficient operation of stores and services.

The Revolutionary government sees in the development of local government, not only a means of solving local problems, but also a "school for administration." Prime Minister Fidel Castro expressed this idea on October 1, 1965, when he said:

"... we will have thousands of men and women learning to administer, thousands of people learning to come up against different opinions and criteria, just and unjust, of the population... It is an experience that the masses have never had the opportunity to acquire because in those bureaucratic centralized government bodies, neither the masses nor the young administrators are able to learn...

If we don't learn to administer how can we aspire
to a society where the functions of a social
character will be such that they will require an
infinity of men and women capable of knowing how
to do things and how to solve problems."

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