



**Ernest Mandel**

**Defend the Cuban Revolution**

**(1964)**

---

From **International Socialist Review**, [Vol.25\\_No.3](#), Summer 1964, pp.80-83.

Transcribed & marked up by [Einde O'Callaghan](#) for the **Marxists' Internet Archive**.

---

*ERNEST MANDEL is the editor of the Belgian Socialist weekly, **La Gauche**, and author of **Traité d'Economie Marxiste**, a two-volume edition of a major Marxist work on present-day economic developments. He spent several months in Cuba recently as part of a delegation from the Belgian labor movement.*

**This article first appeared in *La Gauche* and was translated from the French by Ruth Porter.**

A REVOLUTION that has transformed barracks into schools; that has given the luxurious mansions of the wealthy to government scholarship students; that has led a million adolescents and adults to education; a revolution that has radically suppressed racial inequality and segregation; that has achieved the

miracle of eliminating, in three years, unemployment and underemployment in the rural areas – a notorious evil in all underdeveloped economies; a revolution whose ministers and officials do their allotted tour of guard duty in front of public buildings, as plain militiamen; a revolution that has eliminated from the army – which is now, moreover, called the Rebel Army! – all ranks above that of commandant (the only army in the world which does not include in its ranks colonels, generals and marshals); a revolution that, even according to reports of its US enemies, has assured, for the first time, that all children have enough to eat and go to school. What socialist whose heart is in the right place could fail to be thrilled by such a revolution?

We had felt it for a long time, from the reports and the photographs that reached us from Cuba: the Cuban socialist revolution is today the most advanced bastion of the emancipation of man. After having traveled all over Cuba for seven weeks, seeing every aspect of its life, that general impression becomes specific and more and more confirmed. Nowhere more than in Cuba can one see the immense possibilities of radical social change, of human liberation, that socialism offers the human race.

## **An Underdeveloped Country on Road to Socialism**

The most difficult problem of our time is that of underdeveloped economies. According to innumerable reports of international organizations, every year, every month, every day, the gap between industrialized countries and underdeveloped countries grows wider and wider. The former get richer and richer; the latter get poorer and poorer. This widening gulf of misery doesn't swallow up just a few scattered peoples living around the edges of the civilized world; two-thirds of the inhabitants of the globe must be placed in that category.

Now Cuba shows – after China, it is true, but in an infinitely more obvious and striking way – that this underdevelopment is not due to any fatal weakness, whether geographic, ethnic, racial or economic; that, thanks to a social revolution, a country can pull itself out of economic backwardness in the space of a few years and initiate a rapid climb; and that even before decisive economic successes have been won, the standard of living of the masses can be radically improved by means of a radical change in the use of existing resources.

The Cuban example doesn't apply only to Cuba. It goes for all of Latin America and, with certain limits, for the entire "Third World." The Cubans know this. They proclaim it boldly, regardless of what it costs them. And it costs them dearly, for, without doubt, that is the main reason for the fierce hostility that the government of the United States continues to show toward them. On the Plaza de la Revolucion there is an enormous, permanent inscription, "Long Live the Latin American Revolution!" The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is decorated with a huge banner across its entire facade which proclaims, "Long Live the Workers of

the World.” One cannot talk with a leader, with a plain militant of this revolution, without becoming aware of the extent to which his destiny seems to be identified with that of the revolution on the American continent.

Evidently, the situation in Cuba was, from the beginning, a special one. In 1958, that country had a per capita income that was among the highest in all of Latin America, in third place, right behind Argentina and Uruguay. Today, it can be estimated to vary between \$400 and \$500 per year, while in the poorest countries of the world the annual per capita income hardly ever exceeds \$50.

However, that special situation, on closer examination, was not as significant as the figures cited would lead one to suppose. If the average income was higher in Cuba than in most Latin American countries, it was also more unequally divided. It is enough to compare the magnificence of Fifth Avenue in Marianao, the upper-class suburb of Havana, with the miserable slums of the working-class neighborhood of Santiago – slums which the Revolution has almost entirely eliminated – to realize the fact that a minority of ten percent of the privileged or semi-privileged was the recipient of a large part of this higher national income.

Besides, this higher income was for the most part a result of the special integration of the Cuban economy with that of the economy of the United States, an integration which was, in fact, a complete subordination. It had a paradoxical character: it was an obstacle to any attempted amelioration of the situation, to any definitive break with underdevelopment, to any diversification of industry, yet such a break would risk, in turn, having the initial result of a fall rather than a rise in the average income.

To the immediate economic risks of the social revolution was shortly added the burden of American reprisals: total

economic blockade (the lack of spare parts for American-made transportation equipment constitutes one of the gravest problems of the Cuban economy), and military aggression which necessitates constant defense preparations – at a high cost to the Cuban economy.

Finally, it is necessary to take into account aid from the Soviet-bloc countries and from China which, no doubt, has succeeded in partly neutralizing the effects of this blockade. But it is extremely difficult to establish statistically the real effect of this aid on the Cuban economy, given the fact that it is partly military aid and that transactions are at prices and for qualities that make comparison with the situation before the revolution difficult.

## **Real Social Revolution**

ALL this means that it is extremely difficult to strike a balance sheet of the economic advantages and disadvantages for Cuba proceeding from its particular situation and that, on the whole, its example remains very valuable for the “Third World.” The gist of this example may be summed up in this formula: absolute priority to the solution of social problems, with the view to using the mobilization of the masses in the assault on underdevelopment!

The social revolution cannot rest principally in legal texts or written formulations. It must be carried out by a complete and dramatic social transformation which sweeps away the most flagrant injustices and raises to the top level of society those classes and layers which have been the most oppressed. Doing this, the revolution acquires the

confidence, the devotion, the total adherence of millions of human beings who will be ready to give it their enthusiasm, their labor and their lives.

It is in this devotion that the grandeur of the Cuban revolution consists – a devotion symbolized by the *becado*, the scholarship student. Fidel has brought into the most luxurious mansions in Havana 80,000 sons and daughters of the poor peasants of the rural areas (just as, under another program, he gave to the servants of wealthy emigres the cars of their former bosses, so that they could earn their living as cab drivers!). He has brought the seasonal agricultural workers – who formerly had to live a whole year on the wages of one harvest season – into people's farms, where they receive a salary every month of the year. And the result of this revolution is tangible: the consumption of meat, the consumption of textiles, have *doubled* in comparison with 1958. Since there is rationing and a lowering of consumption in the cities, one can easily imagine how greatly consumption has increased in the country.

The revolution has radically changed housing, clothing, food, medical care, education, leisure, for the majority of the Cuban nation – the agricultural workers and the poor peasants. It has thus created an enormous potential, the effect of which was first visible in the political and military spheres: the militia, the Rebel Army, the crowd of a million people meeting as the General Assembly of the Cuban People to acclaim and approve the First and Second Declarations of Havana – they were, above all, the disinherited masses become master of their country.

Today, it is a question of drawing from this same potential the main forces for a leap forward in the economic sphere.

## The Cuban Economy

Cuban industry is in the process of rapid growth. In comparison with the situation before the Revolution, the annual increase in industrial production is well over 10 percent, probably closer to 15 percent, if the sugar industry is excluded. For the year 1963, the rate of increase in comparison with 1961 is 27 percent, and it is higher in light industry (30 percent) than in heavy industry (21 percent). In 1961, the increase in industrial production (still excluding the sugar industry) was estimated at 30 percent in comparison with 1959.

Certain branches of industry have been started from scratch or developed from embryonic elements. Branches like naval construction, manufacture of agricultural equipment, electrical equipment and leather products, have had the most spectacular development. The textile industry itself has doubled its production compared to the situation before the revolution, but that development was due to an already existing set up, unused before the Revolution.

Cuban industry has had to make a tremendous effort to substitute its own production of certain key elements, necessary to the economy of the country, which had previously been imported from the United States. Thus, spare parts for the machinery of the sugar industry are beginning to be manufactured within the country.

An effort of the same kind comes to the fore in the technical program. The Americans had built, in Moa, the most modern nickel plant in the world. It was just about to start operating when the Revolution broke out. The

American technicians left, taking with them all the plans for putting the enterprise into operation. Today this plant is functioning.

Evidently a rather large number of foreign technicians – especially from the countries of the so-called “socialist camp” – have had to replace the technicians who left the country. But the government is trying to replace them as quickly as possible with Cuban technicians. That is why it has launched the “technical revolution,” which has transformed Cuban factories into a vast school. Some tens of thousands of workers, young and old, are involved in this accelerated program to train Cuban technicians, mainly by the method of half-time apprenticeship, in schools attached to factories or in specially created institutes. When the crop of this tremendous training program is harvested, there will be a spurt in industrial production.

### **Difficulties in Agriculture**

The situation in agriculture is less promising – and that has some effect on industrial production to the extent that the sugar industry is still the most important industry in the country. That is why the statistics on industrial production cited above do not include the sugar industry.

But when one talks of agricultural problems in Cuba, it is necessary to be quite specific: the economic difficulties are in large part a function of the solving of social problems. Two examples illustrate this point. Actually, there is a shortage of labor for the *zafra*, the harvest of sugar cane. The harvesting is done in large part with the help of



volunteers, factory workers, white-collar workers and officials of other industries or public administration. This shortage of labor was caused precisely by the *elimination of underemployment in the rural areas*. Formerly, harvesting of the sugar cane was done mostly by seasonal workers who had no other employment. To the extent that unemployment and underemployment have disappeared, agricultural workers aren't rushing to do the hardest work – and cutting sugar cane in the broiling sun is certainly exhausting labor.

Another example: agriculture is operating at a loss, but at the source of this situation is the incontrovertible fact that the great mass of agricultural workers are now paid twelve months a year on the People's Farms, instead of receiving wages only three or four months of the year, as was the case before the Revolution. Since production has not increased in the same proportion as labor costs, there are significant operating losses.

Side by side with these structural problems, inevitable concomitants of the social progress brought about by the Revolution, there are problems due to errors made in the agricultural domain. These errors fall into two categories: errors of orientation and errors of organization.

In the period immediately after the victory of the Revolution, all the leaders were convinced of the necessity of freeing Cuba from the burden of *monoculture* (single-crop economy) with its twin evils of *close dependence* on the United States and *permanent economic instability*. But there are two ways of freeing an economy from monoculture: either develop other crops side by side with the cultivation of sugar cane, or cultivate other crops as a substitute for the sugar cane. In part, the second way was chosen, and it was obviously wrong. It proved especially wrong in that the rise in price of sugar on the world market created the possibility of building up a significant cash

reserve for the country, thanks to heavy exports. The correct idea of developing a whole chemical industry based on sugar also involves an increase, not a reduction, in sugar production.

Besides, the new organization of Cuban agriculture proved itself too rigid, too bureaucratic, too badly directed. All this had bad results: crops spoiled for lack of labor while, on a nearby farm, labor was not being used productively at full time; workers were called upon so often to do heavy work that turned out to be unnecessary that their enthusiasm waned and they became indifferent to production.

### **Workers in Managing Enterprises**

THESE errors are now in the process of being corrected. The administration of agriculture is being restructured on the basis of some 80 districts (*agrupaciones*), in which a more rational use of labor will be possible and in which there will be more efficient administration. The workers will also have an interest in the progress of production because they will be able to share part of the profits, in excess of the plan, that are made in each district (or on each farm).

At the same time Fidel himself has given this program a vigorous push – so that sugar cane production will be increased and not reduced. The aim is ten million tons of sugar in 1970, which goal is to be reached by means of a general mechanization of sugar cultivation. Also, the diversification of crops and the raising of new ones (such as cotton) will be continued, and care will be taken that there be no fall in the production of coffee, vegetables and fruit –

important for the present needs of the people. Tobacco cultivation is going well.

The fundamental problem posed by the mishaps in agriculture is basically that of making the workers, the producers, aware of the direction in which the economy is going. The directors of industry especially understand that socialist consciousness constituted the essential motor power for progress in production in the period immediately after the Revolution. That is why they attach so much importance to the problem of education and likewise feel that it is necessary to link the workers directly with management in the enterprises. This question will no doubt be resolved in the near future, but the solution calls for a radical reform of the unions, the prestige of which has been lowered in the eyes of the workers, many of the leaders being neither competent nor representative.

The battle to make agriculture self-sustaining is a battle for a more rapid increase in the national income of Cuba. Today, paradoxically, it is industry that is financing the agricultural deficit; tomorrow, it is necessary that agriculture finance the more rapid growth of industry as well as raise the standard of living of the workers. At the same time, the deficit in the balance of payments will have to be wiped out rapidly. Actually, it is covered by Soviet aid, but that is a rather unhealthy situation which will no doubt be overcome in a few years.

## **New Threats of Aggression**

Since the defeat of the mass movement in Brazil – a temporary one, no doubt, but nonetheless fraught with serious immediate consequences – Cuba's

international situation has rapidly deteriorated. From the time of his speech to commemorate the third anniversary of the battle of Playa Giron, on April 19, Fidel Castro has solemnly called the attention of the Cuban people and of international opinion to the new threats of aggression bearing down on Cuba. We do not believe that the international workers' movement has really become aware of this danger. It is therefore necessary to review the essential facts of the problem.

Since the consolidation of the Socialist Revolution in Cuba, i.e., since the defeat of the counter-revolution at Playa Giron, US imperialism has stubbornly been pursuing the immediate aim of isolating Cuba from Latin America. To this end, it has systematically contributed to the overthrow of all the "liberal" bourgeois governments "guilty" of maintaining friendly relations with the Cuban revolution. That was the fate of Frondizi; that was the fate of the president of Ecuador; that was the fate of President Bosch of the Dominican Republic. This anti-Cuban policy has rapidly made a farce of the aims of the Alliance for Progress, namely that only the establishment of reformist governments could, as Kennedy put it, avoid revolutions. The most striking case was that of Venezuela, where the struggle against Fidelismo transformed the Betancourt regime from a "reformist" regime to an ultra-reactionary dictatorship.

Last March, after a meeting in Washington of all the US ambassadors to Latin America, the new undersecretary of State, Thomas Mann, officially buried the corpse of the Alliance for Progress. He announced that from now on Washington would no longer make distinctions between "constitutional" governments and dictatorial governments (provided they are anti-Cuban). That was the green light for

the military coup in Brazil which burst forth a few days later, sweeping out constitutionally elected President Goulart who wanted to introduce the reforms recommended by the defunct Alliance for Progress “in order to stay the mounting waves of communism.”

## **Blockade and Isolation of Cuba**

Brazil will break diplomatic relations with Cuba, no doubt followed by Uruguay and Bolivia. Washington has taken care to have a new, ultra-reactionary presidential candidate in Mexico, one who will no doubt be fiercely anti-Cuban. There remains Chile, where everything depends on the result of the next elections. But the effects of the victory of the reaction in Brazil strongly limit Chile’s chances for a legal victory of the socialist candidate, Allende, especially if the Socialist-Communist Popular Front continues to “have confidence” in the “loyalty of the army toward the Constitution.”

It is true that the blockade of Cuba has failed. But the diplomatic isolation of the Cuban Revolution from the Latin-American continent will have many harmful effects on the Revolution. Particularly, there is the risk of this isolation being a prelude to open counterrevolutionary intervention.

Venezuela has already placed before the Organization of American States a motion condemning Cuba as an “aggressor” and recommending application of all kinds of sanctions, including “military” sanctions in case of a new “aggression.” Actually the government of that country is

trying hard to collect the necessary votes to get this motion adopted at the next session of the OAS. In the event that this motion is effectively adopted, the reactionary governments of Latin America will be well able to constitute a task force in the Caribbean, to try to isolate the Island commercially, to begin harassing and diversionary attacks on Cuban territory to support later attempts at landing counter-revolutionists, even to organize provocations (bombing attacks on counter-revolutionary bases in Nicaragua or in the Dominican Republic, disguised as the work of Cuban planes) with a view to unleashing against Cuba military operations on a much wider scale.

These harassing attacks would place the Cuban government in a very delicate position. If it answers in kind, it gives the reaction an opportunity to “punish the aggressor.” If it does not take retaliatory measures, it has to remain passive in the face of the systematic destruction of factories, the burning of crops, the assassination of militiamen, a passivity which would finally (at least that’s what Fidel’s enemies hope) result in weariness, even demoralization, in the ranks of the revolution.

### **Threat of American Intervention**

These counter-revolutionary projects on the part of the reactionary regimes of Latin America overlap the projects of the counter-revolutionary Cubans and those of the US itself.

Even though Fidel denounced it in his April 19 speech, even though the Cuban government denounced it in a letter to the United Nations and will, no doubt, soon denounce it in a complaint before the International Court at The Hague,

the government of the US continues, without let up, since the October 1962 crisis, daily overflights of Cuban territory, by means of U-2's or a more modern type of plane.

These overflights are completely illegal. The statement that they are "indispensable to the security of the United States" doesn't hold water; everybody knows that the rockets remaining in Cuba are all of a defensive nature. Everybody knows too that it isn't Cuba that "threatens" to bomb the US, but that it's the US that seriously and openly threatens to attack Cuba. Besides, important international documents, subscribed to by the US government, precisely denounce and declare illegal any violations of the sovereignty of small nations under the pretext that such a violation is "indispensable to the security" of a large neighbor. Doesn't Cuba have a lot more right in this connection, to conduct overflights of US territory to assure *her own security*?

American policy toward Cuba is based exclusively on "might makes right." This cynical attitude, which completely disregards international law, constitutes a permanent provocation toward Cuba. The Cuban revolution has decided not to tolerate these provocations forever. It is obliged to act along these lines, especially to the extent to which these overflights of Cuban territory serve as sources of information for military undertakings openly being prepared by counter-revolutionaries for launching from US territory (Puerto Rico!) or from territories of governments allied with the United States.

But any retaliatory measures Cuba can take in this area risk unleashing a furious reaction from the Pentagon which, without assuming the form of open invasion (in order to avoid Soviet intervention), would nevertheless be bloody and cost Cuba dearly: certain US circles are toying with the idea of launching 500 bombers against Cuban bases and towns.

The Cuban people are ready, standing alone, to bear the brunt of such aggressions. They are ready to give their lives to defend their Revolution. But it is the duty of the international working class to smash all efforts to isolate the Cuban revolution.

The struggle between Washington and Havana is not a struggle for or against “representative democracy.” Anyone who can still doubt this should at least learn the lessons taught by events in Brazil! It is a struggle between the economic and social status quo, which involves the semi-slavery of millions of inhabitants of the countryside, which involves the atrocious misery of the slums side by side with the shameless squandering of riches by the millionaires in their “thousand-and-one-nights” palaces, and a social revolution which carries with it all the hopes of well-being and progress of the most oppressed of the oppressed – millions of the starving, Negroes without rights, Indians scorned and humiliated for four centuries.

In this struggle, the duty of every socialist, of every believer in progress, is to take sides without hesitation in favor of the Socialist Revolution of Cuba, to defend this Revolution against all foreign intervention, to show toward this Revolution the same solidarity that we all showed to the Spanish people during the civil war.

---