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Hero and martyr of the
permanent revolution



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Guevara:

Hero and Martyr of the Permanent Revolution

With the assassination of Che not only do we Latin American revolutionists lose our undisputed leader along with Fidel, but the most passionate advocate of permanent revolution of our time.

His life reflects a profound logic that is the logic of the permanent revolution. From petty bourgeois revolutionary in our country who did not understand Peronism, to the leader of the most revolutionary petty bourgeois movement in Latin America, the one led by Fidel. From Argentine FUBA [Buenos Aires University Federation] activist to Cuban guerrilla. From Guerrilla chief to builder of the socialist economy. As such he vindicates the importance of the individual internal revolutionary process of raising the consciousness of the masses. He never forgets his character of Latin American revolutionary and he doesn't stop for a minute pointing out that Cuba is part of the continental revolution. His visits to China, the USSR and Africa see him as a champion of proletarian internationalism, of the world revolution. Once returned to Cuba he moves from declarations and statements to the preparation of the guerrillas in the weakest link in the South American capitalist chain: Bolivia. If he was buried, we could say with Castelao:¹ "They don't bury a corpse, but revolutionary seeds".

Guevara, who risked his life as many times as necessary, until losing it, for the Cuban and Latin American revolution, was not afraid to face and respond to the most serious problems posed by the revolution. From the defence of Cuba to the construction of socialism in the transitional phase, to the economic relations between the socialist countries, there was no problem of critical importance in the struggle of workers that Guevara would not address, to give a way forward: the permanent revolution.

The permanent revolution in Latin America as the only true defence of Cuba

The better known of Guevara's works on guerrilla warfare are categorical: the defence of the Cuban revolution goes through the extension of the Latin American revolution. He quoted Fidel's speech on 26 July 1963 thus in his work *Guerrilla warfare: a method*: "The duty of the revolutionaries, especially at this moment, is to know how to recognise and how to take advantage of the changes in the correlation of forces that have taken place in the world and to understand that these changes facilitate the people's struggle. The duty of revolutionaries, of Latin American revolutionaries, is not to wait for the change in the correlation of forces to produce a miracle of social revolutions in Latin America, but to take full advantage of everything that is favourable to the revolutionary movement — and to make a revolution!"²

1 Alfonso Daniel Rodríguez Castelao (1886–1950) commonly known as Castelao, was a Galician politician, writer, painter and doctor. He is one of the fathers of Galician nationalism. He supported the Spanish Republic and spent the last few years of his life in exile in Buenos Aires. [Translator's note.]

2 Guevara, Ernesto: *Guerrilla warfare: a method*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1963/09/guerrilla-warfare.htm>.

To leave no doubt he advocated the permanent revolution in the same paper he quoted Marx: “Marx always recommended that once the revolutionary process has begun the proletariat should strike blows again and again without rest. A revolution that does not constantly expand is a revolution that regresses”.³

With all clarity he insisted there was an overall counter-revolutionary strategy throughout Latin America of national exploiters and US imperialism and the only response was a global struggle of the entire continent.

“This being the panorama in Latin America, it is difficult to achieve and consolidate victory in an isolated country. The unity of the repressive forces must be confronted with the unity of the popular forces. In all countries where oppression reaches intolerable proportions, the banner of rebellion must be raised; and this banner of historical necessity will have a continental character.

“As Fidel has said, the cordillera of the Andes will be the Sierra Maestra of Latin America; and the immense territories this continent encompasses will become the scene of a life or death struggle against imperialism. We cannot predict when this struggle will reach a continental dimension or how long it will last. But we can predict its advent and triumph because it is the inevitable result of historical, economic and political conditions; and its direction cannot change.

“The task of the revolutionary forces in each country is to initiate the struggle when the conditions are present there, regardless of the conditions in other countries. The development of the struggle will bring about the general strategy. The prediction of the continental character of the struggle is the outcome of the analysis of the strength of each contender but this does not exclude independent outbreaks. The beginning of the struggle in one area of a country is bound to cause its development throughout the region; the beginning of a revolutionary war contributes to the development of new conditions in the neighbouring countries.”⁴

Che, along with Fidel, were the best voices of the strategy and revolutionary theory of the Cuban leadership: there is a single revolutionary process at continental scale, of which Cuba is a very important link, but only one link. The revolution is a continental whole; the triumph will be achieved in an all-out battle.

The transitional stage as a revolutionary process

In October 1963 the Cuban magazine *Nuestra Industria* [Our Industry] published a fascinating debate between Che and Alberto Mora, Minister of Foreign Trade, on the key economic laws in the period of transition to socialism in an underdeveloped country like Cuba.

Mora held they had to let the Cuban economy as a whole and each company to handle themselves automatically according to the laws of supply and demand. For example, that each company or cooperative produce the products that could get the best price. In other words, each company controlled by the workers to continue acting like a capitalist company whose sole objective is the greatest possible profit. Mora insisted that the profits of each company and of each worker are the only engine of the economy of transition. The conclusion of the Ministry of Foreign Trade was self-evident: the centralisation and planning of the Cuban economy are high, the profits of enterprises and workers are paramount. You had to give autonomy to the enterprises and pay the workers for production, just like under capitalism.

Guevara insisted that the economy on the way to socialism is not a capitalist economy in the hands of the workers, but an economy that has goals diametrically opposed to the capitalist economy. The overall economic development for the benefit of the country and the workers and not profits for such companies or workers is the goal of a socialist economy, albeit in an underdeveloped country. Hence it is essential the centralisation and planning of the national economy as a whole. If the production of materials to build thousands of homes is a need for Cuban workers, even if

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.t

this production results in losses, it must be done, argued Guevara, because it is beneficial for all workers in the country. According to Mora's criterion if it did not give profits it shouldn't be done.

Guevara drew from his theoretical analysis conclusions opposite to those of Mora: they had to increasingly centralise and plan the Cuban economy and, instead of paying premiums to encourage the workers to raise production, this had to happen through the raising of the socialist morality of the workers. For Che, the transition of the Cuban economy should be accompanied by a revolutionary process, which was —as we said— raising that consciousness in the Cuban workers.

As in all his theoretical and political analysis Che tended to overlook the details — some aspects of reality, the backwardness of Cuba, of its workers— which demanded giving great importance to material incentives. Anyway, his insistence on the importance of planning and centralisation as an engine of socialist development, as well as the permanent progress of the revolutionary consciousness of the moral incentives for workers was essentially correct. Regardless of all the errors, theoretical and of detail, the position of Che, betting on the development of the revolutionary consciousness of the Cuban masses, was revolutionary and Mora's position opportunistic, Stalinist, which wanted to appeal to bourgeois methods to achieve socialist development.

This polemic is part of the one taking place between the Stalinist-Khrushchevites (they are the same thing) and the Maoists. The entire world revolutionary vanguard knows that Stalinism has raised the theory that socialism will be built by appealing to the desire for profits or for wages of the workers. The Maoists, however, believe that socialism will be built appealing to the political consciousness of the masses.

The Cuban leadership closed the debate with a correct position, synthesis of both positions, but highlighting the essential contribution made by Che. On 8 May 1965, President Dorticos gave the official position of the Cuban leadership on the polemic held: "We are very pleased that the moral factor has been pushed by the efforts of the Ministry of Industry (Guevara) to the maximum. We know that this position has been adopted by the Minister and we applaud his doctrine. Our present and our future depend critically on our ideology and our morale. This does not deny the cardinal principle that should regulate the payment for work in a socialist society; specifically to each according to his work. In our opinion, this principle is fully and consistently compatible with the principle that underlines the importance of moral stimulants. To harmonise and synthesise these two factors, while we keep its adjustment, we must strengthen every day the importance and extent of moral stimulants as one of the goals of our economic work."

Opposed the USSR's commercial policy, in defence of the underdeveloped countries

Not enough emphasis has been placed on the political and theoretical battle conducted by Guevara against this aspect of the USSR's economic policy. The Soviet government negotiated with the other socialist countries as if they were capitalist countries. They swap goods by their value in the world market and sometimes they pay less for products of the underdeveloped socialist countries. The latter, just like under the imperialist regime must sell to the USSR raw materials for industrial products. In such exchange at equal values, there is already a commercial exploitation, the same as that carried out by the imperialist countries with the underdeveloped nations in the world market. Any student of economics knows that raw materials fall every year in value relative to industrial products. This same relationship exists between socialist underdeveloped countries and the USSR.

Guevara, revolutionary from head to toe, relentlessly denounced this "bourgeois" injustice committed by the USSR. In the seminar of Afro-Asian Solidarity held in Algiers in early 1965, he stated categorically:

"The socialist countries must help pay for the development of countries now starting out on the road to liberation. [...] it is our profound conviction."

“How can it be ‘mutually beneficial’ to sell at world market prices the raw materials that cost the underdeveloped countries immeasurable sweat and suffering, and to buy at world market prices the machinery produced in today’s big automated factories?”

“The socialist countries have the moral duty to put an end to their tacit complicity with the exploiting countries of the West.”⁵

His fight for the economic unity of the Socialist and underdeveloped countries

Not content with denouncing indirectly the bureaucratic, false conception of foreign trade of the Soviet rulers, Guevara gives an entire revolutionary program essentially correct.

“A great shift in ideas will be involved in changing the order of international relations. Foreign Trade should not determine policy, but should, on the contrary, be subordinated to a fraternal policy toward the peoples.”

Consistent internationalist, he opposes the attempt that every socialist government take care of its own patch, its country, and emphasises the need for unification and overall planning economies of the different socialist and backwards countries.

“Furthermore, development cannot be left to complete improvisation. It is necessary to plan the construction of the new society. Planning is one of the laws of socialism, and without it, socialism would not exist. Without correct planning, there can be no adequate guarantee that all the various sectors of a country’s economy will combine harmoniously to take the leaps forward that our epoch demands.

“Planning cannot be left as an isolated problem of each of our small countries, distorted in their development, possessors of some raw materials or producers of some manufactured or semi-manufactured goods, but lacking in most others. From the outset, planning should take on a certain regional dimension in order to intermix the various national economies, and thus bring about integration on a basis that is truly of mutual benefit.”

What a contrast this position with the battle of the Russian and Chinese governments to defend their autarchy or independence rather than tending to plan their economies jointly!

And, to dispel any doubts about the role he believes the economy plays in the process of world revolution, our Che— we assume that yelling— says: “Weapons should not be considered merchandise in our world; one should deliver them without payment in the quantities required by the people who need them”. One thinks of Stalin, the theoretician of socialism in one country, selling weapons at gold prices and with a dropper to the Spanish proletariat during the Civil War and one cannot less than increasingly admire this hero of the permanent revolution.

His testament: revolutionary internationalism

The revolutionaries of the world we consider the Vietnamese guerrillas the vanguard of the revolution.

The lack of full support from the USSR and China we consider it a betrayal.

There is no other militant internationalism at this time than fighting for full support to North Vietnam and the Vietnamese guerrillas and making the revolution in our own countries.

This is the position of Fidel. In his letter “testament” Che passionately insists on the same. Let’s hear:

“When we analyse the lonely situation of the Vietnamese people, we are overcome by anguish at this illogical moment of humanity.

⁵ Guevara, Ernesto: “At the Afro-Asian Conference in Algeria”, 24 February 1965, www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/02/24.htm.

“U.S. imperialism is guilty of aggression — its crimes are enormous and cover the whole world. We already know all that, gentlemen! But this guilt also applies to those who, when the time came for a decision, hesitated to make Vietnam an inviolable part of the socialist world; running, of course, the risks of a war on a global scale — but also forcing a decision upon imperialism. And the guilt also applies to those who maintain a war of abuse and snares — started quite some time ago by the representatives of the two greatest powers of the socialist camp.

“We must ask ourselves, seeking an honest answer: is Vietnam isolated, or is it not? Is it not maintaining a dangerous equilibrium between the two quarrelling powers?

“And what great people these are! What stoicism and courage! And what a lesson for the world is contained in this struggle! Not for a long time shall we be able to know if President Johnson ever seriously thought of bringing about some of the reforms needed by his people - to iron out the barbed class contradictions that grow each day with explosive power. The truth is that the improvements announced under the pompous title of the ‘Great Society’ have dropped into the cesspool of Vietnam.

“The largest of all imperialist powers feels in its own guts the bleeding inflicted by a poor and underdeveloped country; its fabulous economy feels the strain of the war effort. Murder is ceasing to be the most convenient business for its monopolies. Defensive weapons, and never in adequate number, is all these extraordinary soldiers have - besides a love for their homeland, their society, and unsurpassed courage. But imperialism is bogging down in Vietnam, is unable to find a way out and desperately seeks one that will overcome with dignity this dangerous situation in which it now finds itself. Furthermore, the Four Points put forward by the North and the Five Points of the South now corner imperialism, making the confrontation even more decisive.

“Everything indicates that peace, this unstable peace which bears that name for the sole reason that no worldwide conflagration has taken place, is again in danger of being destroyed by some irrevocable and unacceptable step taken by the United States.

“What role shall we, the exploited people of the world, play? The peoples of the three continents focus their attention on Vietnam and learn their lesson. Since imperialists blackmail humanity by threatening it with war, the wise reaction is not to fear war. The general tactics of the people should be to launch a constant and a firm attack on all fronts where the confrontation is taking place.”⁶

If Trotsky was the prophet and theoretician of the permanent revolution, Guevara is its hero, its martyr. That he made mistakes, that he was not a theorist of the calibre of Marx, Lenin or Trotsky, that he magnified the guerrilla technical focus and the three stages, *Vamos chicos!* [c’mon guys!], as Cuban comrades would say to all pedants of the leftist brotherhoods of America and Europe, we all know that. Rosa Luxemburg was not lagging behind in missing some theoretical problems and Liebknecht was not sure what dialectic was, and they are, nevertheless, greats of the proletariat and the universal revolution.

Our Guevara is now also one, by his own right, for his life, for his teachings, for his death. But if that were not enough, it would be one for having coined in his last public document, his testament letter, the slogan and program of the exploited of the world right now, “Make two, three, many Vietnams”. “With mournful chants, with the rattling of machine guns and new shouts of war and victory”, we pledge to do so, Commander Guevara. Rest in peace. §

⁶ Guevara, Ernesto: “Message to the Tricontinental”, 16 April 1967, www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1967/04/16.htm.