

**Steve Cushion, *A Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution: How the Working Class Shaped the Guerrillas' Victory* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2016) pb 272 pp. ISBN: 9781583675816**

Reviewed by Gary Prevost

London-based trade union activist Steve Cushion has written an invaluable contribution to our understanding of victory of the Cuban revolutionary forces in 1959 by focusing on the role of organized labor in the defeat of the Batista dictatorship. Leaning heavily on the labor archives of the Institute of Cuban History in Havana and interviews with participants in the struggles, Cushion fashions a well-written and well-researched account of the role of the working class struggles and their interplay with the rural guerrilla army and the armed urban underground. The latter two movements have been previously well documented and generally credited with the success of the revolution, but Cushion argues that these studies combined with the official narrative of the leaders of the Cuban revolution from Fidel Castro on down have tended to underestimate the role of organized labor. Rather than just a two-front war against Batista, he argues that the interaction of all three elements are necessary to understand the defeat of Batista and equally important in understanding the pro-working class trajectory that the revolution took from 1959 forward.

Cushion successfully documents a myriad of working class organizing, especially in Eastern Cuba, that occurred in the wake of Batista's coup in 1952 and the attack on the living standards of Cuban workers in the ensuing years made worse by the complicity with Batista of the existing trade union leadership under Eusebio Mujal. Cushion documents a lively picture of working class activism in 1950s Cuba ranging from those employed in the dominant sugar sector to those in shops, department stores, and white-collar workers in the offices and banks. The activism, carried out under harsh government repression, took multiple forms from slowdowns and walkouts to sabotage and the formation of clandestine cells that would form the workers' section of the guerrilla movement. Documented is the development of the tactic of railway workers of 'trade unionism on a war footing' which combined mass action with acts of sabotage that burned sugar fields and derailed trains. Cushion documents a textile workers' strike in Matanzas leading to a complete shutdown of the city with female workers in the Woolworth's department store helping to enforce the citywide general strike in defiance of efforts by state security forces to reopen the store. Overall, a key contribution of the book is to document wide-ranging local labor activism throughout the 1950s often in opposition to national leaders working in complicity with the government to control the militancy of the workers.

A crucial contribution of the book is its analysis of the general strikes, one successful and the other a failure that occurred in the latter stages of the revolution. According to Cushion's analysis, the failure of the April 1958 general strike was a turning point in the rebel movement's struggle against Batista. The crisis caused by the failure of the strike led the two main political forces, the 26th of July Movement (M-26-J) and the Popular Socialist Party (PSP) to rethink their tactics and their relationship with each other. The two organizations both embraced the tactic of the general strike but with different understanding of its dynamic. To the PSP, it was a traditional working class action that by its sheer weight of numbers it would paralyze the economy and bring the government to its knees. For the M-26-J, the general strike was more akin to a mass popular armed insurrection. Cushion argues that when the August 1957 and April 1958 strikes did not bring down Batista, the two main anti-Batista political forces came closer together in their thinking and ultimately united to defeat the dictatorship. The PSP came to realize that strike actions would not be successful without an armed component, and the M-26-J came to realize that mass participation of workers could not simply be summoned but had to be tied to concrete economic demands of the workers. This convergence of views came to full fruition at the end of 1958. The well-chronicled rebel army offensive culminating in the defeat of Batista's army by Che Guevara's forces at Santa Clara forced the dictator into exile on December 31 but as Cushion demonstrates the 1 January 1959 general strike jointly organized by the PSP and M-26-J sealed the fate of Batista's government and established the working class and socialist character of the revolution that emerged full blown over the next 2 years.

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