

Imperialism and Revolution

Episode #23



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Antonio Guiteras

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In the last episode of *Imperialism and Revolution* on January 16, we saw that there emerged in Cuba in 1930 and 1931 a popular movement against the Machado dictatorship, in which participated the Communist Party of Cuba, led by Rubén Martínez Villena; the National Workers Confederation of Cuba; the University Student Directorate; the Student Left Wing; the Feminist National Alliance; Oppositionist Women; university professors and other professionals; and the “Revolutionary Junta of New York.” And we noted that among those who participated in the halfhearted armed rebellion of the “Revolutionary Junta” of 1931 was Antonio Guiteras.

Guiteras was influenced by a number of revolutionary movements and ideas, including: Cuban revolutionary theory and

practice, in which Martí and Mella were the most influential leaders/intellectuals; the Russian Revolution; the Mexican Revolution; the struggle of Augusto César Sandino in Nicaragua; the Irish independence movement; the ideas of Antonio Bláquez on the role of the revolutionary vanguard; the ideas of the French socialist Jean Jacques Jaurés; and the analyses of Marx and Lenin.

Born in 1906 in Montgomery County near Philadelphia, Antonio Guiteras Holmes was the son of Calixto Guiteras Gener, a Cuban who had a degree in engineering, and Marie Therese Holmes Walsh, an Irish-American from Philadelphia. The family lived in the United States, speaking English in the home, until 1913, when the family relocated to Cuba, and Antonio and his sister learned Spanish, even though the family continued to communicate in English. The Guiteras family lived in the western province of Pinar del Rio, where Calixto taught French. Antonio completed pre-university studies in Pinar del Rio, and he entered the University of Havana in 1924, enrolling in the pharmacy program. When the Student Revolutionary Directorate was formed in April 1927, he was elected by the pharmacy students as their

representative in the organization. Upon receiving a Doctor of Pharmacy degree in August 1927, he began to work as a pharmacist in Pinar del Rio.

Guiteras relocated to Havana in 1929, and in 1931, he became involved with anti-Machado conspirators, activities that brought him to Holguin and Santiago de Cuba. As part of the actions of the Revolutionary Junta in August 1931, Guiteras and his followers engaged government troops in a brief combat in a plantation in the eastern province of Oriente. The rebels suffered three casualties, and they were captured and imprisoned. During his four months in prison, Guiteras worked with Felipe Fuentes in winning followers among the prisoners. Fuentes was a communist leader from the eastern province of Oriente and was one of the founders of the Student Left Wing. Guiteras was granted amnesty on December 7, 1931.

Guiteras was a leading figure in the establishment of the Revolutionary Union in September or October of 1932. The Revolutionary Union united a number of existing small insurreccional groups in the eastern and central provinces. Its members included professionals, intellectuals, artisans, service employees, workers, farmers, veterans of the independence war, and students. It advocated a popular, democratic, agrarian, and anti-imperialist revolution of national liberation that would create conditions for the gradual construction of a socialist society in Cuba.

The strategy of the Revolutionary Union was urban and rural armed struggle, utilizing such tactics as sabotage, execution of government representatives and police officers, the taking of military barracks, and guerrilla actions in the countryside. On April 29, 1933, the Revolutionary Union took the barracks of San Luis, but Guiteras and his followers were forced to withdraw in the face of an army counterattack. In the second half of 1933, Guiteras and the Revolutionary Union led small guerrilla units, composed principally of peasants, in the eastern and central provinces. They continued to operate until the end of the Machado regime.

On September 4, 1933, nearly one month following the fall of Machado, the Revolutionary Group of Cuba was created, declaring itself to be the Provisional Revolutionary Government of Cuba. It was formed by an alliance of Army sergeants who had seized the military base in Havana with leaders of the University Student Directorate, an organization with reformist goals that used tactics of urban armed struggle. On September 10, the Provisional Revolutionary Government named Dr. Ramón Grau San Martín as president.

Antonio Guiteras was named to the important post of Secretary of Government and War in the Grau government. As a prominent member of the government, the leader of its revolutionary faction, Guiteras pronounced his vision to establish a government "where the interests of workers and peasants are above the profit desires of national and foreign capitalists." He advocated the economic independence of Cuba with respect to the United States, the gradual nationalization of public services, the immediate distribution of land to peasants and agricultural workers, and social and employment equality for women.

The Grau government enacted a number of legislative reforms, proposed by Guiteras and made possible through tactical alliance between the revolutionary and reformist factions within the government. It was a progressive government, independent of the United States, even though the military engaged in ferocious repression of striking workers and the Communist Party of Cuba. Cintio Vitier writes that the Grau government "emitted an impressive series of truly revolutionary laws and decrees." He describes it as "an audacious anti-imperialist offensive, the first realized in Cuba from power." With reference to Guiteras, he writes, "As incredible as it seems, Cuba was governing itself in the person of that pale, serious, direct and unyielding youth of twenty-six years of age."

Because of its radical character, the Grau government was under constant attack by various Cuban sectors with interests in the maintenance of the neocolonial order; and it was not recognized by the U.S. government. The Grau government was ended by a military coup d'état on January 15, 1934, led by Fulgencia Batista, carried out with the encouragement and support of the U.S. government. An exception to the neocolonial pattern of U.S. control, the Grau government came to be known as "the government of

100 days.”

Following the coup d'état, Guiteras went underground, with the intention of organizing an armed revolutionary struggle against the Batista government. In March of 1934, Guiteras established Joven Cuba (Young Cuba), which advocated the taking of power by the people by means of armed insurrection. It spread rapidly, and cells were established throughout the island.

However, the antagonism and division among the popular organizations enabled the Batista government to consolidate power. Because of their disagreements over strategies, the PCC and Joven Cuba were unable to form an alliance. During 1934 and 1935, a wide variety of small revolutionary groups emerged during 1934 and 1935, each with different programs and tactics.

Antonio Guiteras was killed by the army of Batista on May 8, 1935, in the city of Matanzas. The need for a coalition of opposition popular organizations, in spite of differences in goals and tactics, is an important lesson of the historic moment.

We also should note that Guiteras was a professional, born into the middle class, who was widely read in various Latin American and Western currents of the Left; and that the revolutionaries of the Revolutionary Union and Joven Cuba included professionals, intellectuals, students, and peasants, in addition to workers. Many of them sacrificed their lives. They emphasized not the end of the exploitation of the working class, but the abolition of all forms of exploitation of the various popular classes and sectors; and they possessed a fundamental anti-imperialist perspective, in defense of the sovereignty of their nation. In Cuba, we see the evolution of Marxist-Leninist theory in revolutionary practice.

This is Charles McKelvey, speaking from Cuba, the heart and soul of a global socialist revolution that struggles for a more just, democratic, and sustainable world.

Sources

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