

# *Imperialism and Revolution*

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Episode #20

Julio Antonio Mella

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In this episode of *Imperialism and Revolution*, we see that the neocolonial situation of Cuba gave rise in the 1920s to a student movement that perceived the issues confronting students as tied to the condition of the country as subordinated to foreign interests, and which, in addition, was oriented to unification with workers, a tendency pushed by an exceptional leader that emerged from the student movement.

Julio Antonio Mella was born in Havana on March 25, 1903. His father, Nicanor Mella, was the proprietor of a prosperous tailor shop, located in the commercial center of Old Havana; his mother, Cecelia McPartland, was born in Dublin, and she was the daughter of a poor Irish farmer who migrated to the USA. Nicanor and Cecelia met about 1900 in New Orleans, where he frequently traveled to purchase cloth and other supplies for his business. They lived for several years in Havana, without being legally married, inasmuch as Nicanor had a previously established family. Nicanor transmitted to his sons his admiration for his father, a military general in the Dominican independence struggle; his support for the

independence struggles in the Dominican Republic and Cuba, and his opposition to the U.S. military intervention of 1898-1902 and to the imperialist projections of the United States toward Latin America. Nicanor regularly read the principal newspapers and news magazines of the era, with particular attention to international news.

Julio Antonio Mella was enrolled in various private schools in Havana, New Orleans, and Mexico. He was an avid reader, particularly appreciating the works of Martí, and he became an advocate of Latin American unity in common struggle for true independence. With the triumph of the Russian Revolution, he became influenced by Marxism and the Communist International, although he remained a strong advocate of truly independent Latin American republics, in accordance with the ideals of Bolívar and Martí. The Mexican Revolution also influenced his thinking. He entered the University of Havana in 1921, and he immediately was integrated into a group of leaders of a student organization against corruption, which had become one of the principal problems of the neocolonial republic.

In December 1922, Mella was the leading force in the establishment of the University Student Federation (FEU), which on January 10, 1923, issued a manifesto calling for the autonomy of the university, the participation of students in the administration of the university, and reform of the curriculum. On January 15, the students took control of the university campus, which resulted in recognition of FEU as a student organization by the Cuban government.

FEU convoked the First National Congress of Students in 1923. It emitted a "Declaration on the Rights and Duties of the Student," which stresses the duties of students, and it reveals consciousness of U.S. imperialism. The Declaration affirmed the right to freedom of teaching, without government interference, based on scientific knowledge; the duty to respect the great teachers, who make sacrifices for the well-being of humanity; and the duty to work intensely for personal development with respect to moral and intellectual truth. The Congress also declared its opposition to a permanent treaty between Cuba and the USA, and it called for Latin America unity against the Pan-Americanist project of the United States.

A motion signed by Mella and others was read to the Congress. It decried the hypocrisy of the imperialist nations, which "have formed an unspoken international partnership of crime, pillage and oppression, impeding the self-determination and the progressive development of the peoples." It protested "the outrages committed against the peoples of the Caribbean, Central America, the Philippines, Ireland, Egypt, India, and Morocco," calling for the true self-determination of said peoples. And it called for diplomatic recognition of the Russian socialist republic.

In 1923, Mella was a leading figure in the establishment of the José Martí Popular University, which was dedicated to the formation of the working class. Mella gave lectures on such themes as "The failure of the political system" and "The danger of Yankee capitalism," and he taught a course on the History of Humanity and Cuba. The Popular University became a center for the exchange of ideas between students and workers, until it was closed by the government in 1927 as part of a campaign of repression against the popular movement.

In August 1924, Mella presided over the creation of the Confederation of Students of Cuba, which brought together university and secondary students. It called for the absolute independence of all educational institutions from the control of the state, with freedom of action for teachers and students, and for the dismissal of corrupt professors. It proclaimed its "antipathy to the political parties," and it declared that "the greatest enemy of the peoples of America is Yankee imperialist capitalism, which bribes governments and corrupts public opinion in order to exercise its tutelage over the peoples of [Latin America]".

By the beginning of 1924, it was clear to Mella that the reform of the university could not be attained as long as the country remained under neocolonial domination. He had concluded that a social revolution was necessary in order to make a university revolution. In 1925, Mella and Carlos Baliño López founded the first Communist Party of Cuba (PCC). Baliño, a pioneer of Marxism in Cuba, was a tobacco worker,

and he had been one of the founders with José Martí of the Cuban Revolutionary Party in 1892. The Communist Party was immediately declared illegal, and it was condemned by the press. Its leaders were murdered, with the number of assassinations reaching 150 during its initial years. Many of its members were deported or incarcerated. It survived, however, operating clandestinely. It was the most disciplined and politically conscious organization of the country, although it had some tendency to apply European concepts to the Cuban situation, a characteristic not shared by Mella. The PCC had considerable influence among workers and peasants, and it was a recognized affiliate of the Third International.

Mella was arrested on November 27, 1925, falsely accused of having placed a bomb in a theater. Mella's 18-day hunger strike provoked national and international protest of his unjust arrest, and the government was compelled to release him. With a new order to detain him, Mella departed Cuba clandestinely in January 1926. During three years of exile in Mexico, he continued his revolutionary activities, becoming a member of the Central Committee of the Mexican Communist Party. Mella was assassinated at the age of 25 in Mexico City on January 10, 1929, by an agent of the Cuban government, an event that provoked international protests.

The keen listener and careful reader may be noticing something in the unfolding story. Marx has become an influential voice for workers and students in neocolonial Cuba, but the struggle is not unfolding entirely as Marx had envisioned. Workers are a central force in the Cuban struggle, but so are students. The issue of the exploitation of the workers is present, but so is the issue of foreign domination. Marx's formulation was based on his appreciation of the vantage point of the worker, in a political-economic-social context that itself was constructed on the foundation of the European conquest of the Americas. Cuba pertains to that conquered world, now struggling for its liberation. In this different historical and social context, a different formulation is necessary. In the neocolonial Cuba of the 1920s, Marx is present, but so is Martí.

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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