

Cuba's Land Reforms Move Forward (April 1st, 1960)

Abstract

Land reform was a top priority for the leaders of the Cuban Revolution; the Socialist Party referred to it in this article in the *Berling Zeitung*, an East German newspaper, as “a decisive step for the development of the revolution.” This was much to the consternation of foreign interests, who owned significant tracts of land (especially the United States). By 1958, the year before the Revolution, 9.4% of well-off landowners (called *latifundios*) owned 73.3% of Cuba's available farming land, nearly completely marginalizing small-scale peasant farmers [*campesinos*]. The law discussed in this article, the First Agrarian Reform Law, eliminated *latifundios*, nationalized all foreign-owned rural property, transferred land to *campesinos* who had worked on land without ownership, and crafted a state agricultural sector that controlled about one third of national farmland. The reform aimed to increase the overall wealth and health of the nation; though the law, and the following Second Agrarian Reform Law (passed in 1963) equalized land distribution and gave power back to the *campesino* class, it did not eradicate Cuba's problem of dependence. Instead of being dependent on the United States and Spain, Cuba became dependent on the USSR; the country purchased Cuba's products (which it often paid prioritized rates for) and supplied inputs, which led to large-scale collapse in the agricultural sector after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Source

Last October, when I stepped out of the plane in Havana, it felt as if I had just walked into a steam bath. Fleeting acquaintances from the past welcomed me as if they were close friends. And then they did everything in their power to explain their revolution to me, so much so that I soon forgot the sweat pouring out of my every pore.

To gain insight into Cuba's development since the ouster of the dictator Batista, they told me that I should look into land reform. “La reforma agraria va”— the land reforms are moving forward. “Will American companies also be affected?” I ask. “Why not?” they answered.

Large-scale landholdings as an obstacle

Then they showed me the law. It dates from May 17, 1959 and was promulgated by the Council of Ministers in the Sierra Maestra in Oriente Province, commemorating the place where Fidel Castro began his struggle against the dictatorship. Article 1 of the law states:

“Large-scale landholdings are abolished. No living person or legal entity may own more than 30 *caballerias* of land. Parcels of land that exceed this maximum are to be expropriated or distributed to landless peasants and agricultural workers.”

A *caballeria* is equivalent to 13.43 hectares. The most recent statistics on the distribution of land date back to 1946. At that time, 2,336 proprietors held over 4,250,000 hectares of land, in other words, 1.5 percent of landowners controlled more than 46 percent of all farmland, whereas 70 percent of landowners (110,000 farmers holding 76,000 *caballerias*) owned only 12 percent of land. In addition, there were another 62,000 small-scale farmers each owning an allotment of less than 0.75 *caballerias*. By contrast, as Fidel Castro asserted on May 22, five medium-sized US corporations alone possessed 50,000 *cabellerias* or 671,000 hectares.

The existence of large-scale agricultural land holdings has become a constraint to development in all Latin American countries. The maintenance of large agricultural estates depends upon an outdated extensive farming system, which requires vast areas of land to lie fallow. It neglects technical development and instead exploits the most backward strata of the population in the interest of profit, as was common in the early days of capitalism. In Cuba, this type of agriculture is designed for export and is completely specialized in the production of raw sugar for its main purchaser, the USA. The rural population is kept in ignorance and poorly paid. They have no purchasing power, which in turn prevents the development of any national industry.

The first step

The land reform currently being implemented in Cuba complies with the desires and needs of the broad masses of the rural population. The Cuban Popular Socialist Party calls the reform “a decisive step for the development of the revolution.” They patiently explain to the country’s workers that land reform is the first step in breaking the power of the enemies of the working class in the countryside and in gaining a strong ally in a consolidated peasantry.

Cuba used to have 500,000 farmworkers, most of whom worked only four months a year, as well as 150,000 tenant farmers and sharecroppers. Today, most of them have been given land. The law has established a *living minimum* land allocation, according to which a family of five should receive 26 hectares of land. Small-scale farmers will now have their property size increased to this minimum. Land will be distributed first to those who had been evicted from their property, then to those residents of the district in which the reform is implemented who do not yet possess the minimum property allotment, then to the agricultural workers, and, finally, to all those who have submitted an application for land.

Corporate sharks shed tears

The expropriation entails compensation to former owners in the form of state bonds, which may be redeemed after 20 years at an interest rate of 4.5 percent. The main factor in determining the amount of compensation is the entry in the land registry. Large American corporations, in particular, reported vastly lower purchase prices for their lands in order to save on taxes. Now they are being punished for their fraudulent behavior. From May to October, the three largest corporations— United Fruit Co., Atlantica del Golfo, and Cuban-American Sugar—were required to cede some 700,000 hectares of land.

Of course, the estate owners and corporations have put up a fight. They unleashed a vicious smear campaign in a vast swathe of the North American press against Fidel Castro’s government. William G. Raines, the vice president of United Fruit Co., demanded that the Cuban prime minister “renounce various provisions of the land reform law.” Castro released the contents of a letter sent by the lawyers of the Francisco Sugar Company in Havana from its head office at 106 Wall Street in New York. It stated that at a joint meeting with the leaders of the National Association of Animal Breeders, they had decided to set up a fund to finance a press campaign against Cuba’s agricultural reform.

The United Fruit Co. and its allies, who in 1954 were still capable of overthrowing the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala, have succeeded in carrying out assassinations of Cuban representatives in Haiti, Santo Domingo, and Miami. There has even been an assassination attempt against Castro. In addition, planes have flown over Cuba dropping propaganda material and even bombs.

Assassinations and bombs

Next, they tried blows to the gut: The USA halted the purchase of Cuban sugar. This decision, however, revealed the extent to which Washington still has not understood how much the world has changed. It is not simply that the people of Latin America want to free themselves from their economic shackles in

order to confidently exercise their national freedom. In the rest of the world, as well, the balance of power is constantly changing in favor of the forces of progress. The Soviet Union and China were able to purchase Cuban sugar with no difficulty. As a result, their prestige, along with that of Cuba, has grown throughout Latin America.

South America takes notice

The newspaper *Noticias de Hoy* warns, “We should be in no doubt that our enemies are very strong and will continue to lay traps in our way and even provoke open external intervention.” Nonetheless, Cuba has also made many friends. Today, this small nation of six million on the largest of the Antillean islands has become the model for all the people of Latin America. Cuba’s influence has led Venezuela to take up the matter of land reform. For the first time, agricultural reform is playing a role in a Brazilian electoral campaign. And in Argentina, this issue has become the focus of political struggle in a number of provinces.

Therefore, one could say that agricultural reform in Cuba has established a new phase in the development of all Latin American states. The anti-feudal revolution is a new and very effective weapon in the anti-imperialist struggle for the liberation of these people—and one that could prove decisive.

Source: Hermann Burkhardt, “Kubas Landreform geht voran,” *Berliner Zeitung*, April 1, 1960, p. 5.

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