

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarchism in Cuba

Dana M. Williams

2009

Dana M. Williams
Anarchism in Cuba
2009

Retrieved on 22nd November 2021 from onlinelibrary.wiley.com
Published in *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*.

theanarchistlibrary.org

Anarchism in Cuba predominantly took the form of anarchosyn-
dicalism and was largely indistinguishable from the militant labor
movement. Anarchism influenced the independence movement,
the growth of the labor movement, and general strikes in particu-
lar during the early 1900s. Anarchists were continuously repressed
by Cuba's dictators, and particularly in the aftermath of the Cuban
Revolution of 1959, which caused many to go underground, into
prison, or into exile.

The first trace of anarchism in Cuba may be found in the 1850s
and 1860s, when followers of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon created a mu-
tual aid society. Some of the first worker newspapers and organiza-
tions were created at this time; the first anarchist paper, *El Obrero*
(The Worker), was started by anarchists Enrique Messonier and En-
rique Roig San Martín in 1872, as well as the Centre de Instrucción
y Recreo (Instruction and Recreation Center). A flurry of anarchist
activity occurred during the 1880s. Messonier was the secretary
of the *Círculo de Trabajadores* (Workers' Circle), which was dom-
inated by anarchist participation. Roig San Martín began another
newspaper called *El Productor* (The Producer), a weekly anarchist
paper that was Cuba's most important labor periodical and lasted

until 1890, when it was closed. Alianza Obrera (Workers' Alliance) helped to coordinate anarchist activity in Cuba as well as Cuban communities in Florida, especially Key West and Tampa.

The influences upon Cuban anarchism are diverse and unique. Spanish anarchism was influential within Cuba, particularly the ideas and writings from Catalonia, Spain. Commercial trade between Catalonia and Cuba aided in the transportation of anarchist periodicals from Spain to Cuba during the late 1800s. Spanish workers in Cuba also helped to transmit ideas from Europe. Yet Cuban anarchism was not strictly analogous to Spanish anarchism. A major Spanish anarcho-collectivist organization – Federación de Trabajadores de la Región Española (Workers' Federation of the Spanish Region) – continued to be an important model for Cuban anarchists, even after it folded in Spain. The influence of slavery and colonialism also created distinct conditions that separated the Cuban experience from the Spanish one. According to Casanovas (1998), most of the island's first anarchists initially came from reformist labor organizations and made the eventual transformation to anarchism, often due to interactions and experiences within the labor movement. Reformist labor leaders such as Saturnino Martínez were relentless in their critique of anarchism, going so far as to characterize "anarchism [as] an evil spreading throughout Europe ...[and that to] avoid social upheaval, workers had to become small property owners" (Casanovas 1998: 155). Still, anarchism took deeper root in Cuba's labor movement than reformism or Marxism did. The inability to influence colonial elections stymied reformist labor efforts for power, and thus encouraged collectivism and unionism independent of political parties.

After Spain outlawed slavery in 1886, Cuban anarchists allowed ex-slaves, called Afro-Cubans, to enter their organizations following anarchist congresses in 1887 and 1892. Anarchists also used the imagery of slavery to their advantage to characterize other exploitive relationships as akin to slavery. Anarchists considered

Cuban society to be rife with a “slavery” (namely industrial and colonial capitalism) that transcended the abuse of Afro-Cubans and affected those of all races. In order to strengthen the position of labor groups, anarchists tried to incorporate workers of all races into the Alianza Obrera and other groups, since all workers were needed in order to exercise labor strength during strikes. While most labor leaders remained white, the 1888 cigar-makers’ strike brought some Afro-Cuban labor leaders to the forefront, including Fernando Guerra and Eduardo González. The Alianza even demanded in 1889 that a particular factory allow workers of all races to work there. Thus, racism became an important target for anarchist organizers in the post-slavery period of the early labor movement.

The Alianza was the first union to criticize and focus upon the unique oppression and exploitation faced by women workers in the tobacco industry. The poor treatment of tobacco workers also included sexual abuse of women. Even though the increased employment of women had begun to depress male wages, the largely male labor movement still fought for improved working conditions for women. There were paternalistic attitudes expressed by some labor and anarchist leaders – such as Roig San Martín, who thought women should support their husbands and sons – but the movement largely supported women’s efforts. Female worker grievances were aired in newspapers (even when the focus was upon abusive male workers) that also promoted the unionization of women workers. The anarchist-led labor movement was unable to unionize women, even though female leaf-stemmers went on strike in 1889 to demand higher wages and a stop to sexual abuse by foremen, as well as joined other strikes led by men. Instead, anarchist-feminism in Cuba tried to encourage women to take an active role in public life. It also advocated “free love,” argued for the right of women to choose their romantic partners, and criticized the exploitation faced by housewives.

As Cuban nationalists advocated for independence from Spain, they met growing resistance from workers influenced by anarchism's socialist ideas about socioeconomic independence from capitalism and the bourgeoisie (Spanish or Cuban) more than just independence from a colonial power. José Martí, the leader of the independence movement, modified his rhetoric to address the anarchist emphasis upon class struggle by incorporating demands for a classless society and other matters of social justice into his propaganda. Anarchists distributed literature to Spanish soldiers, encouraging them to not fight against the Cuban independence movement and to instead join anarchists fighting for freedom. Separatists, including anarchists, planted bombs to destroy pipelines and bridges, and tried to assassinate the Spanish officer Valeriano Weyler – who was also the governor of Cuba at the time and had imprisoned hundreds of thousands of Cubans in concentration camps. Spanish repression followed these efforts, with the closing of labor organizations, forbidding of certain political events, and the deportation of Spanish anarchists.

However, anarchists were torn over participation in the independence movement. Proponents of joining the struggle for independence saw greater opportunities for freedom in a strictly Cuban polity. Others believed in Martí and his rhetoric of a future classless Cuba after independence. However, Martí died before independence, so the accuracy of such promises cannot be ascertained. Opponents of the independence movement noted the participation (and active funding) of Cuban bourgeoisie elements that were sometimes the target of labor movement struggles. An independence movement led by Cuba's wealthy would be unlikely to end in freedom for the Cuban working class, with just a replacement of one system of domination by a more indigenous leadership.

The eventual independence from Spain led to control by the United States. The US immediately exerted its influence over Cuba as well as other lands formerly controlled by Spain (Puerto Rico,

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Casanovas, J. (1998) *Bread, or Bullets! Urban Labor and Spanish Colonialism in Cuba, 1850–1898*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Dolgoff, S. (1976) *The Cuban Revolution: A Critical Perspective*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Fernández, F. (2001) *Cuban Anarchism: The History of a Movement*. Tucson: See Sharp Press.
- Poyo, G. E. (1985) *The Anarchist Challenge to the Cuban Independence Movement, 1885–1890*. *Cuban Studies* 15, 1: 29–42.
- Shaffer, K. R. (2005) *Anarchism and Countercultural Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Cuba*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.

Guam, and the Philippines), after paying \$20 million to Spain for the islands. American business interests invested heavily in Cuba and the US military itself occupied the island from 1898 to 1902, and subsequently intervened from 1906 to 1909, 1912, and 1917 to 1922. These repeated interventions, justified by the US Congress's Platt Amendment and the Cuban Constitution itself, fueled Cuban nationalist sentiment, called *cubanía*, as well as anarchist opposition to US imperialism.

After independence, anarchists began to organize Cuba's most profitable industry: sugar. Anarchist influence spread throughout the rest of Cuba as well, with anarchosindicalism being the ideology of choice within much of the labor movement. The Cuban republic's first general strike, in 1902, was led by Gonzalez Lozana and other anarchist tobacco workers, who aimed to end the system of apprenticeship that kept apprentices bound to employers in exploitive ways that amounted to indentured servitude. The strike was crushed by the threat of US intervention, but it set the pattern for growing strike activity up to World War I. During this period, anarchists assisted in the formation of worker cooperatives throughout the island; 200,000 people were members of the cooperative system, who paid dues to have access to recreation and cultural facilities, and medical services. In addition to producer and consumer cooperatives, anarchists also led a movement for the creation of agrarian cooperatives (such as the later *Asociaciones Campesinas*), although these were later largely replaced with state farms by the Castro government.

Government repression beginning in 1913 by General Mario García Menocal – the island's first dictator – was severe. Anti-anarchist laws were passed in the years prior to World War I. Spanish anarchists in Cuba were deported before and after the war began. During the war, despite Cuban anarchists' neutrality, general strikes provoked a response by the US, which sent the navy to Havana. Cuban law enforcement gave the US government

a list of Cuban unions and leaders' names. The Centre Obrero was closed and anarchist publications were prohibited.

During the postwar lull, Cuban anarchists convened a workers' congress, which decided to form the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labor; a similarly named organization existed in Spain). Many anarchist periodicals began during this period. For example, *¡Tierra! (Land!)*, which had been Cuba's longest-running newspaper at the time, in print from 1899 to 1915, began a second run. Alfredo López, a key member of the Federación Obrera de La Habana (Workers' Federation of Havana), helped begin an anarchosindicalist campaign to unite all worker and campesino organizations into a single organization, regardless of ideology.

The Bolshevik victory in Russia created a schism in the Cuban Left. As in countries around the world, many anarchists in Cuba were initially sympathetic to the socialist-led revolution and some began to change their ideological affiliations to communism. According to Shaffer (2005), during the 1920s, anarchists debated the merits of aligning with the Marxists, with anarchosindicalists in greater favor of such a move than anarchocommunists.

During the 1920s the Machado government cracked down on anarchists, closing the Sindicato de la Industria Fabril Industrial, arresting anarchosindicalist leaders Margarito Iglesias, Enrique Varona, and López (all of whom were later murdered or "disappeared"), deporting strikers, and prohibiting all strikes. In response to repression the anarchist movement went underground. Militants formed various groups, including Espártaco (Spartacus), Los Solidarios (Those in Solidarity), and the Federación de Grupos Anarquistas de Cuba (Federation of Cuban Anarchist Groups). Anarchists struck alliances with university students and some politicians, fought against the government in street battles, and failed in a number of attempts to assassinate Machado. In 1933 a US-backed military coup forced Machado from office. In the wake of Machado's overthrow, communists and anarchists aligned with

the Federación Obrera de La Habana engaged in a gun-battle after anarchists denounced the Partido Comunista Cubano (Cuban Communist Party) for its assistance in ending a general strike that year that was started by transportation workers. Thus, the tentative relationship between the communists and anarchists was permanently torn asunder. Fulgencio Batista became the dictator of Cuba and the PCC subsequently created an alliance with his government.

In 1940 anarchists formed the Asociación Libertaria de Cuba (Libertarian Association of Cuba), which involved itself in labor organizing, publishing *Rumbos Nuevos (New Paths)*, and distributing anarchist propaganda, and which even gained leadership within certain major unions. Anarchosindicalists during this time had near-control over transport, culinary, construction, and electric utility unions. Through the end of the Batista dictatorship, the *Solidaridad Gastronómica (Culinary Workers' Solidarity)* was able to keep publishing its anti-communist, anticapitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-fascist views.

Some anarchists fought with Castro's Movimiento 26 de Julio (July 26th movement) and when Batista fled in late 1958 all anarchists – and most everyday citizens – rejoiced. However, the Castro government, having taken over the major labor federation, Confederación de Trabajadores de Cuba, expunged leading anarchosindicalists from their strongest unions, issued authoritarian dictates for the unions and stacked union meetings with pro-Castro non-members, suppressed a critical pamphlet by German anarchist Augustin Souchy, and arrested "counter-revolutionary" critics. The suppression and restriction grew pronounced after Castro declared his government to be Marxist-Leninist and moved toward closer relations with the Soviet Union. While some anarchists tried to join in guerilla actions against Castro, some anarchists joined the Castro government and others fled into exile in Florida (where many Batista supporters had gone). Since this time there has been no active anarchist movement within Cuba itself.