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Cubans general strike to overthrow president, 1935

Olivia Ensign

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Following the 1933 general strike, which resulted in the overthrow of President Machado, Ramon Grau San Martin was made the head of the Cuban government. His administration was given legitimacy because of support by DEU minister of government Antonio Guiteras and chief of the army Fulgencio Batista.

On January 15th 1934 Antonio Guiteras was overthrown in a coup organized by Batista. Batista, in communication with US ambassador Welles, realized that the U.S. would not recognize a government controlled by Grau, and thus shifted his military backing in support of moderate Carlos Mendieta. Despite this coup there still remained a revolutionary mood and between 1934 and 1935 more than 100 strikes occurred. While in hiding Guiteras revived the opposition movement to focus on the overthrow of President Mendieta and Batista. It was this environment of unrest that sparked the general strike of 1935.

Under Mendieta and Batista much of Machado's political structure was reinstated. This included the appointment of corrupt officials and increased repression of the people. The 1935

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strike began in late February when the teachers and students of Cuba's public schools unexpectedly staged a walkout. They initially struck for increased government funding for public schools.

By February 25th 4,000 teachers and 100,000 students were on strike. They were soon joined by the students of the University of Havana, who organized a strike committee, appealing to the general population to join the movement in a General Strike. The students called for full reestablishment of all constitutional guarantees, the subjection of the military to civil authority, and withdrawal of all troops from educational institutions. Soon the university faculty joined the strike, criticizing the government's inability to restore social and economic stability. Labor unions were the next group to join the strike.

Prior to the strike there had been a breakup of the coalition supporting Mendieta, resulting in a number of groups leaving the government, including the Menocalistas, the revolutionary group ABC, and prominent cabinet members. These groups along with the Autentico group and other government employees threw their support behind the strikers, bringing the total participation in the general strike up to 500,000 people.

Both the Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas (CNOC) and the Communist Party were at first reluctant to support a general strike, feeling it had been enacted prematurely. Guiteras was also hesitant to give his support warning the campaigners that the environment was not right and that the strike lacked the proper organization. However, as the strike gained more and more popular support these groups hesitantly gave their support to the general strike.

The reaction to this strike by President Mendieta and Batista was ferocious. They immediately suspended the constitution, declaring martial law in Havana. The University of Havana, viewed by the government as a foundation of the resistance, was taken over by the military and remained closed for over

three years. Many leaders of the strike were abducted from their homes and brutally assassinated. In addition special courts were created solely for the purpose of convicting strikers of illegal opposition. Mendieta also dismissed large amounts of government employees and sent soldiers to Union Headquarters to vandalize the buildings and burn the archives. Finally, Mendieta brought in large groups of strikebreakers to occupy the positions of the strikers in order to keep Havana running. These actions succeeded in crushing the strike.

The defeated strike was followed by a period of intense suppression, in which all unions and free speech was banned. In addition, the months following the strike were the first time civilians were executed by firing squad. However, this suppression backfired on Mendieta, creating widespread dissent within his government. This resulted in Mendieta losing the remainder of his support, and in December 1935 he was forced to resign the presidency. Therefore, despite the defeat of the strike, the goal to overthrow Mendieta was achieved. Nonetheless, Batista remained in power and replaced Mendieta with another puppet president.

There is little information on the specifics of this strike, such as individual participants and a timeline of events. What information there is lies within the context of the political environment of Cuba in 1935. This would perhaps be different if the strike had lasted until Mendieta's resignation. Also there is much more information to be found in Spanish sources.

Influences

This campaign was influenced by another General strike in Cuba in 1933 (see "Cubans general strike to overthrow president, 1933") (1)

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