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Che Guevara

# A revolutionary fighter - What is Che's relevance today?

40th anniversary of the death of Che Guevara

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“...it is not for revolutionaries to sit in their doorways of their houses waiting for the corpse of imperialism to pass by” (Second Declaration of Havana, 1962)

“Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man”.

These, according to some accounts, were the last words of defiance uttered by Che Guevara before his execution on 9 October 1967, in Bolivia, by Felix Rodriguez, a CIA adviser with the Bolivian army. Che was 39 years old.

If the CIA adviser and the Bolivian army thought that by killing Che they would bury with him his appeal and inspiration they could not have been more wrong. Forty years after his death, flags, banners, portraits and slogans of Che are carried on the mass demonstrations of hundreds of thousands and millions in the new revolt that is now sweeping Latin America. Throughout the continent, as a new wave of struggle engulfs country after country, the emblem of Che Guevara is seen on the streets of Sao Paulo, Caracas, La Paz, Mexico City, Santiago and the other urban centres. While it appeared that Che was isolated from the Bolivian masses at the time of his execution, fittingly, one of the countries at the heart of mass struggles, today, is Bolivia. Millions recently took to the streets of La Paz to protest against the far right and the threat of counter revolution.

Amongst the flags and placards carried on that massive demonstration were images of Che Guevara.

Beyond Latin America, forty years after his death a new generation of young people in Europe, Asia and Africa walk the streets with Che Guevara images on T-shirts, bags and base ball caps. While for many it is a fashion statement, for others it is a political declaration. They identify with the legacy left by Che Guevara as a symbol of struggle, defiance, internationalism, and for a better, socialist world. Today, in most countries, the establishment politicians and institutions are increasingly regarded as corrupt, unrepresentative, untrustworthy, self-seeking careerists. Che Guevara is justifiably viewed by these young people as an incorruptible, principled revolutionary fighter.

What his execution did, in fact, create, was a legend. As the slogan daubed on a wall near his grave in Bolivia – before his remains were returned to Cuba – declared: “Che – Alive as they never wanted you to be”. On the anniversary of Che’s execution, it is apt not only to salute his struggle against oppression but also to draw important lessons from his experiences, including his positive features and mistakes. These are invaluable against the background of the new wave of struggle currently sweeping Latin America. They also include important lessons for the impending battles of the working class internationally, as capitalism enters a new era of crisis and turmoil with increasing velocity.

## **Che joins the struggle**

Che Guevara, became a committed revolutionary, a socialist internationalist, and decisively broke from his

middle class background and joined the oppressed and poor to fight for a better world. As an Argentinean medical student, Che, undoubtedly, could have secured a more comfortable life. Yet, like the best of the left wing radical middle class, he was prepared to turn his back on such comforts, and committed his life to fighting imperialism and capitalism.

Che was drawn into political struggle, mainly as a consequence of the poverty and social conditions and struggles he witnessed during two famous travel ‘Odysseys’ he undertook in 1952 and 1953/4. They aroused a determination within him to fight injustice and the capitalist system. These travels helped to change his life. At the end of his first trip, Che recognised: “The person who wrote these notes died upon stepping once again onto Argentine soil, he who edits and polishes them, ‘I’ am not ‘I’: at least I am not the same as I was before. That vagabonding through our ‘America’ has changed me more than I thought”

These experiences are depicted in the film, ‘Che’s Motor Cycle Diaries’. During his travels’ apart from his encounter with socialists in Peru, communist copper miners in Chile, the magnificent Bolivian revolution, and a host of others, Che was deeply affected by his visit to Guatemala. He witnessed the struggles under the radical, left-leaning, populist government of Jacobo Arbenz. This government was eventually overthrown by a CIA-backed coup. These events are graphically revealed in John Pilger’s recent outstanding film, ‘The war on democracy’. During his stay in Guatemala, Che also met, for the first time, Cuban exiles who had participated in the assault on the Moncada military barracks in Cuba against the Batista dictatorship. But it was later in Mexico City that he was to meet Fidel Castro for the first time.

## **Lessons of Guatemala**

The impact of the defeat in Guatemala was to have a profound effect on Che, as he saw the consequences of the failure of the Arbenz government. The popular Arbenz regime carried out significant reforms, which enraged US imperialism and the quisling ruling class in Guatemala. A limited land reform was enacted and the hated US ‘United Fruit Company’ was nationalised, to the horror of the ruling elite in Washington. Like Bush today, they were not prepared to tolerate any government which would not toe the line, especially in what US imperialism regarded as “its own back yard.”

Arbenz was trapped by attempting to introduce some relatively limited reforms without breaking from capitalism. By leaving capitalism and landlordism in tact he gave the counter-revolution time to plot and organise which they did.

The CIA-backed coup was to become the first of a series of such interventions over the next four decades throughout Latin America. Arbenz failed to act and put his faith in the “democratic constitutional loyalty” of

armed forces and refused to arm the masses. When, at one minute to mid-night, he eventually ordered the army high command to distribute arms to the people, they refused to do so. This mistake was to be repeated two decades later, in Chile, when Socialist Party President, Allende, put his faith in the “democratic” loyalties of Pinochet and the military, and agreed to a constitutional “pact” not to touch the officer caste and the military high command.

This flowed from the ideas of the reformist-left and the ‘stages theory’ of a gradual step by step, incremental policy to eventually replace capitalism. Such ideas have repeatedly allowed capitalism and reaction to bid its time, to prepare its forces to strike at an opportune moment and to defeat the working class. Allende refused to arm and mobilise the working class and overthrow capitalism. As a result, thousands of Chilean workers and youth were drowned in blood, in a military coup in 1973.

Events in Guatemala, at the time, however, led Che to look for an alternative way of combating capitalism and imperialism. But he was not drawn towards the Communist Parties. His experiences, so far, led him to become suspicious of the CPs and especially their policies of supporting ‘Popular’ or ‘People’s Fronts’. This policy put them in alliances with the so-called “liberal” section of the national capitalist class. This wrong policy was justified by them on the basis that such a tactical alliance was ‘temporary’ and necessary to be able to struggle against imperialism. They did not have the objective of fighting for socialism but of firstly strengthening “parliamentary democracy”, developing a national industry and economy, and passing through a stage of capitalist development before it was possible to move towards the working class taking power.

This policy resulted in the CPs holding back the struggles and demands of the workers, justified on the basis of not “frightening” or alienating the “progressive” wing of the capitalist class. As a result, in many countries the workers’ movement was effectively paralysed and disarmed by this policy, which often led to the bloody defeat of the working class at the hands of reaction. The application of this policy resulted in the establishment of a fascist regime under Franco, in Spain, in 1939, following his victory in the civil war. It was also to prove to be disastrous in Chile in 1973.

Unfortunately, similar ideas are echoed today by the leadership of the movement in Venezuela and Bolivia.

## Joining 26<sup>th</sup> July Movement and to war

Based on his experiences in Guatemala, and discussions about Cuba, Che, as his ideas began to develop, rejected this ‘stages’ approach, although, he had not developed a rounded-out alternative to it. While being repelled by the Communist Parties, whose approach he found too “conservative” and “orthodox”, Che was drawn towards the struggle unfolding against the Batista regime in Cuba, and joined the July 26<sup>th</sup> Movement in Mexico.

For Che, this seemed to offer a more combative arena of

struggle. The 26<sup>th</sup> July Movement, (named after the fated attack on the Moncada barracks in 1953, led by Fidel Castro, who was then in exile in Mexico), was, at that stage, quite a wide-ranging organisation. It included a liberal democratic wing, whose objective was the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship and the establishment of a “democratic” Cuba.

However, at that stage, they did not stand for the overthrowing of landlordism and capitalism. The movement also included a more radical socialist element, in which Che was to increasingly emerge as a prominent representative.

It was on 2 December 1956 that a small, badly organized group of 82 guerrilla fighters, including Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, landed in Cuba and began what became a two year guerrilla war. This culminated in the downfall of the hated Batista dictatorship and the unfolding of the Cuban revolution. Only a handful of the original group of fighters who landed in Cuba survived. Some drowned during the sea crossing while others were to fall victim of Batista’s army or decease.

During the war, Che was to play a heroic role, made all the more so by his lifelong struggle with chronic asthma. Every obstacle, hardship and pain that it is necessary to endure fighting a guerrilla war, was an even greater burden for him because of his health condition. It was Che’s revolutionary determination which drove him to refuse to let his health prevent from playing a decisive role in the struggle he was now engaged in.

As the war progressed, the guerrillas won increasing sympathy from the peasants. After a two year battle, with many ebbs and flows, the guerrilla war against Batista was victorious. Anger and hatred against the Batista regime in the cities began to reach boiling point. The Batista regime finally collapsed and the rebels entered the cities on New Year’s Day 1959, to be greeted by the eruption of a massive general strike. The playground of US imperialism, with its lavish casinos and brothels, whose clientele was largely US businessmen and their side kicks, was about to be closed down as a social revolution gathered momentum.

## Socialism or capitalism

The process that unfolded meant that the working class in the cities played an auxiliary role to the guerrilla war. Some on the left have argued that although the working class entered the arena of struggle later, it decisively shaped the character of the regime that was to emerge into a genuine socialist regime of workers’ democracy. However, the process was more complicated. The absence of a conscious, organized movement of the working class in the leadership of the revolution did affect the type of regime which eventually was established, as explained here later.

In the early stages of the revolution, when Castro and Che Guevara entered Havana, it was not yet fully clear how far events would go. While Che was a committed socialist at

this stage, Castro was not raising the issue of socialism but was limiting himself to a “cleaner” more “liberal” and “humane” capitalism. These were similar ideas to those advocated by Hugo Chávez, when he first came to power, in 1998. Then he spoke only of a more “humane capitalism” a “third way” and a “Bolivarian revolution”. Only in the recent period has Chávez raised the idea of socialism and the socialist revolution.

The attempted coup in Venezuela, the employers’ lock out, and mass movement of the working class and poor to defeat reaction during these threats by the counter-revolution to regain control of the situation, have driven the process towards the left. This was reflected by Chávez, who now proclaims his government is socialist and the “revolution in Venezuela” is socialist. However, despite this positive development, after having been in power for almost a decade, capitalism still remains in Venezuela and it has not been overthrown.

## Revolution in Cuba

In Cuba, the revolution was driven forward following a series of tit-for-tat blows with the US, until three years later capitalism and landlordism were eventually overthrown. This process was possible at that time because of a combination of factors which included; the massive pressure from below by the workers and peasants, the refusal of US imperialism under President Eisenhower – and his successors – to try to embrace and influence the Cuban regime but rather to impose a boycott which has lasted until today, numerous assassination attempts on Castro, and the existence, at that time, of centralized, planned economies in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which were ruled by a vicious, bureaucratic dictatorship but appeared to offer an alternative to capitalism.

A nationalized, centrally planned economy was eventually introduced in Cuba. This was a tremendously positive step forward and had an electrifying effect in Latin America and internationally.

Che Guevara played a crucial role in this process, and from the outset was pushing for the revolution to take a more “socialist” road. Moreover, from the beginning, Che stressed the need for the revolution to be spread internationally. He played an important role in drafting what was known as the ‘Second Declaration of Havana’ which was published in 1962. This makes inspirational reading even today. Amongst other things, it answers the question of why the US responded with such ferocity to the revolution on a relatively small island: “(The USA and ruling classes) fear that the workers, peasants, students, intellectuals and progressive sectors of the middle strata will by revolutionary means take power ... fear that the plundered people of the continent will seize the arms from their oppressors and, like Cuba, declare themselves free people of America”.

## Working class and socialism

However, while Che undoubtedly aspired to the idea of the international socialist revolution, his greatest weakness, and his greatest tragedy, was his lack of understanding of how this was to be achieved. He had been drawn towards the guerrilla struggle as a means of winning the socialist revolution rather than basing himself on the working class in the cities. Even in countries where the working class in the cities comprised a minority of the population, its collective role and the consciousness, which arises from its social conditions in the factories and workplaces, means that it is the decisive class for spearheading and leading the socialist revolution. This was the experience of the Russian revolution in 1917.

In practice, this demonstrated that the capitalist class in the neo-colonial countries, which are tied to both landlordism and imperialism, are incapable of developing the economy, industry, building a stable democracy or resolve the national question. These tasks of the democratic bourgeois revolution in the modern epoch cannot be resolved by the capitalist class. Today, in countries where the tasks of the bourgeois revolution remain to be resolved, the task falls to the working class, with the support of the poor peasants and others exploited by capitalism, which are linked to the socialist revolution and the need to spread it internationally.

However, in Cuba, because of the rottenness of the Batista regime and the political vacuum, it appeared that the guerrilla struggle offered the way forward. In reality, even there it had come together with the eruption of a general strike after the war was effectively won, as the guerrillas moved into Santa Clara, Havana and other cities. A similar process later also developed in Nicaragua, when the Sandinistas took power in 1979. While nationalising about 25% of the economy, they failed to overthrow landlordism and capitalism. As a result, over a period of time, a creeping counter-revolution was eventually able to triumph. Now Daniel Ortega, the former Sandinista president, has been returned to power. Having fully embraced capitalism, Ortega joined hands with his former opponents in the US-backed Contras and right-wing Catholic Church.

However, based on this experience in Cuba, Che wrongly attempted to replicate a guerrilla struggle, first in Africa, and then through-out Latin America and internationally, where conditions were entirely different and the working class was in a much stronger position, with more revolutionary traditions and experience. The lack of a rounded-out conscious understanding of the role of the working class in the socialist revolution was undoubtedly Che Guevara’s biggest political weakness.

## Lessons for today

These events are rich in lessons for the new wave of struggle sweeping Latin America today. The coming to power of a series of radical left governments, especially of Hugo Chavez, in Venezuela, and Evo Morales, in Bolivia, represents an important step forward for the working class, in

these countries and internationally. The coming to power of these governments are an important positive step forward following the setbacks faced by the working class internationally during the 1990s. They have carried through important reforms and taken some measures against the ruling class and the interests of imperialism. Yet, if capitalism is not overthrown, they can also face defeat and the threat of reaction. This threat is already been seen in Venezuela and Bolivia. So far, the spontaneous movement of the masses from below has held reaction in check. However, the threat still remains, and if capitalism and landlordism are not overthrown, it will prepare and strike again.

It is very positive that both Morales and Chavez speak of socialism. But the crucial question is how to achieve it and overthrow capitalism. Neither government yet, has gone as far as Allende, or the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, in encroaching on the interests of the ruling class. Evo Morales, faced with attempts at reaction, is making the same mistake as Allende in Chile and talks about the “democratic” and “constitutional” loyalty of the military high-command and leaves them intact.

### **Benefits of a planned economy**

As a person, Che Guevara was not prepared to demand of others what he was not prepared to undertake himself, and so he returned to active guerrilla warfare. Attempting to take the revolution to Africa, Che led a doomed expedition to the Congo. Later, he returned to Bolivia to launch a struggle, which ultimately cost him his life.

However, in Cuba, before Che sacrificed himself in Bolivia, the revolution which resulted in the overthrow of capitalism and landlordism, demonstrated the superiority of a planned economy.

Even today, ravaged by the consequences of the collapse of the former Soviet Union and loss of economic subsidies, and suffering from the effects of the US imposed-boycott, the gains of the Cuban revolution are to be found in the form of one of the best health systems in the world. Just a few years after the revolution, illiteracy was abolished. Free health care was available to all. Education and healthcare remain amongst the central pillars of the revolution. With one teacher per fifty seven inhabitants, the teacher pupil ratio remains one of the best in the world. The same can be said of doctors. 73% of operations carried out in Pakistan following the recent catastrophic earthquake were undertaken by the 2,600 doctors and health technicians sent from Cuba. While life expectancy in Cuba is 75 years of age, in Russia, where capitalism was restored, it plummeted to about 57 years of age.

None of these gains would have been possible without the planned economy and the revolution. The CWI supports all these and other gains of the Cuban revolution. Yet, at the same time, the form the revolution initially took had consequences for the nature of the regime that was established.

### **What type of regime?**

The government led by Castro and Che Guevara after the revolution was immensely popular and enjoyed overwhelming support. However, the absence of the organised working class consciously leading the revolutionary process – which it did in Russia in 1917 – meant that there was not genuine workers’ and peasants’ democracy established. While there were initially elements of workers’ control in the factories, there was not a genuine system of democratic workers’ control and management. A bureaucratic, top-down regime took shape.

Some of these bureaucratic features and ‘top down, administrative’ methods are also present in Venezuela, today. The absence of conscious, independent organisation and participation by the working class is one of the main obstacles holding the Venezuelan revolution in check, at the present time. Without this, any state which overthrew capitalism would give rise to a bureaucratic, administrative regime which would hold back the economy and come into collision with the interests of the working class. In Cuba, Che began to come into collision with these bureaucratic obstacles in the revolution. He was instinctively against any privileges or perks being taken by any government official or representative. He was very harsh with those in his government department who attempted to take even the most minimal privilege for themselves above what a worker or peasant received.

When Che traveled to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, he was disgusted and repelled by what he saw of the lavish lifestyles and contemptuous attitude the bureaucrats there adopted towards the working class. He also was increasingly frustrated with bureaucratic features that were present in Cuba.

However, despite reacting against the horrific, monstrous bureaucratic dictatorship in the USSR and Eastern Europe, which on one occasion he described as “horse-shit”, Che did not develop a clearly formulated alternative to it or see how to fight against it, either in the USSR and Eastern Europe or in Cuba. As Che’s experience as a revolutionary grew, he was undoubtedly searching for such an alternative. He was denounced as a Trotskyist by the Soviet bureaucracy.

### **Che and Trotsky**

While in Bolivia, Che carried a tome of Trotsky in his knapsack. According to some reports, the book was ‘Revolution Betrayed’. Indeed, Che was introduced to some of Trotsky’s writings earlier. The Peruvian former air force officer, Ricardo Napurí, who refused to bomb a left-wing uprising, in 1948, gave Che Guevara a copy of Trotsky’s book, *The Permanent Revolution*, when he met him in Havana in 1959. The Cuban revolutionary Celia Hart, whose father, Amando Hart, fought with Castro and Che Guevara, and who was a Cuban government minister, said that it was Che Guevara who first convinced her to study Trotsky. Her father also showed her some books by Trotsky in the 1980’s.

It is evident that one of Che Guevara's political features was his willingness to discuss and explore different ideas and opinions. Unfortunately, despite his reading of some Trotsky, by the time of his premature death, at the age of 39, Che had not been able to draw all the necessary conclusions to develop a coherent and rounded out alternative. To do so, in isolation, without contact, discussion, and exchange of ideas, along with a broader international revolutionary experience to draw on, would have required a massive leap in understanding which, alone, would have been extremely difficult. In time, had Che lived and experienced more international events and struggles of the working class, through further debate and dialogue, we can be confident that he would have drawn the right conclusions of the tasks necessary to achieve the international socialist revolution.

These deficiencies in Che's understanding had tragic consequences for him and the legacy he could have left for a new generation of young workers and youth, who are now joining the battlefield to fight oppression, war and capitalism. Yet, Che's positive features and lasting legacy, as a symbol of uncompromising, self-sacrificing, incorruptible struggle, serve as a source of inspiration for a new generation. If the lessons of his mistakes can be also learnt, then Che's determined struggle for the objective of an international socialist revolution will be achieved.