

Organized Labor

Introduction

Despite Machado's troubles with the members of his own social, economic and political class (middle class students and politicians) Cuba's relatively young industrial labor movement posed few challenges to his administration even though the unions were quite active. Unionization efforts began in the early 1920s and are coincident with the rise of organized labor worldwide and indeed some of Cuba's labor agitation was attributed to foreign influences, especially Spaniards from the Anarchist movement. If active enough to incite arrest or a trial, those foreign labor leaders were often returned to Europe. Both Machado's government and Cuban employers were agreeable to the formation of unions, provided they excluded foreign agitators.¹ The Havana Post reported in 1925, after Machado became president, that fifteen men were deported, plus twenty-two women who would leave "voluntarily." Another thirty "reds and agitators" (in the words of the Havana Post) were arrested and awaiting the next steamer "where they will be returned to their mother country" of Spain.² In another case, Roberto Edelisson, a chemist "was quite frank in his statement that he came to Cuba to assist in emancipating the Cuban working classes

¹ Crowder to Secretary of State, October 31, 1925, Havana, 837.00/2598 Despatch #117 AG.

² Havana Post, September 17, 1925, Havana.

by establishing the soviet system of government here.”³ He was deported along with six other Spaniards. Not only the newspapers, but the American diplomats in Havana reported the deportation of “radical agitators, practically all of whom are of foreign birth, who have been largely responsible for the wasteful and at times menacing strikes which characterized the zafra last year (1924).”⁴

The Havana Post reported on May 18, 1928, that several Spaniards were arrested and deported for Bolshevist activities. The Evening News reported on May 21, 1928, that some of those arrested had become active in the Liberal party as local faction leaders. An assassination attempt against Machado was foiled when a Spaniard from Calaluna was arrested and deported. He is described as a hunter and a sharpshooter and planned to kill Machado from the back of a motorcycle while Machado was traveling to his country home in Santiago de las Vegas.⁵ The Evening News reported that another group of foreigners were spreading communist and Bolshevist propaganda in Camaguey. But Communist agitation was around before Machado so this was nothing to arouse new suspicions.

The American embassy continued to report several major strikes in the provinces and noted that there was a move to form a National Labor Party.⁶ One of the newspapers reported that the Socialist Club of Cuba, “presided by the Labor

³ Evening News, September 25, 1925, Havana.

⁴ Crowder to Secretary of State, October 31, 1925, Havana, 837.00/2600.

⁵ Havana Evening Telegram, October 1, 1925, Havana.

⁶ Crowder to Secretary of State, September 14, 1925, Havana, 837.00/2598 Despatch #117 AG.

leader Francisco Domenech, is endeavoring to organize a ‘Cuban Labor Party’ ” and made an announcement to this effect in October 1925.⁷

Railroad Unions and National Labor Party

The Railroad Brotherhood pioneered unionization of the railroads in the early 1920s and grew stronger under Machado by merging with the *Federacion de Empleados del Ferrocarril de Cuba* and the *Union de Obreros del Ferrocarril del Norte del Cuba*.⁸

Strikes were handled by mediators, not troops. A September, 1925 railroad strike in Camaguey ended when the Railroad Brotherhood met with Machado’s Secretary of Interior, Zayas Bazan. The Secretary mediated an agreement between Agustin Perez (President of the Railroad Brotherhood) and the railway companies.⁹ In the same month the Railway Brotherhood called for a National Labor Congress to found a National Federation of Labor with the goal of creating a national Labor Party. This went unchallenged by Machado, perhaps because of an understanding to exclude anarchists and communists: Juan Arevalo, head of the Havana section of the Railway Brotherhood, said that the union would not request the presence of delegates from recognized anarchist organizations.¹⁰

⁷ Herald de Cuba, October 21, 1925, Havana.

⁸ Crowder to Secretary of State, October 31, 1925, Havana, 837.00/2600.

⁹ Havana Evening Telegram, September 11, 1925, Havana.

¹⁰ Crowder to Secretary of State, September 30, 1925, Havana, 837.00/2599.

Anarchists and Communists remained suspect. The Cuban secret service uncovered a “vast Communist plan to overthrow the government with some 150,000 workmen” organized in part by the the Havana Labor Federation and the *Sindicato de la Industrial Fabril*. This internationalist plot, perhaps a bit over optimistically, extended to Cuba, Mexico, and the United States.¹¹ The president's memoirs leave us with a fascinating story of a "communist leader" by the name of Varona (first name unknown), who was betrayed by a Russian immigrant who pretended to be a Communist sympathizer. The Russian’s family had all been assassinated by the Bolsheviks, and he was now consumed with revenge. He obtained plans and documents implicating Varona and turned them over to Major Rogelio Zayas Bazan, Secretary of the Interior. These plans targeted some of the sugar mills and the Cuban Railroad. Machado’s government offered to pay his passage out of the country, but he pleaded that rather he should be expelled as a communist so he could go on and betray others in revenge for the death of his family. Plans were made for activities throughout the Caribbean and the southern United States with hopes of stirring the blacks to revolt. Funds from Mexico were funneled through Varona and re-sent to Florida and Louisiana. Other money was passed on to Central America and the Caribbean Islands, while some remained in Cuba. That which remained apparently became a source of bitter contention and he was murdered soon after he had been released from prison.¹²

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., Box 1, Folder 8, IV-28.

This story is confirmed by reports from American diplomats as well, who reported that the Cuban secret service uncovered a “vast Communist plan to overthrow the government with some 150,000 workmen organized.” It specifically mentioned the Habana Labor Federation and the Sindicato de la Industrial Fabril.¹³

Cuban newspapers reported other Anarchist and Communist “conspiracies” or “rebellions” from time to time in both Havana and the provinces,¹⁴ but it didn’t seem to occupy a significant portion of Cuban interest.

Conclusion

The origins of Cuban labor unrest preceded Machado, and labor organizations were accommodated under his administration as long as they were led by Cubans and peaceful. Machado’s ouster hardly brought labor peace to the island. For example, Antonio Guiteras, a member of Grau San Martin’s cabinet (1933-34) lead strikes while he served on Grau’s post-Machado government on December 14, 1933. The manager of United Fruit Company against whom the strike was directed reported that the meeting was “highly communistic.”¹⁵ The labor movement in Cuba during the 1920s and 1930s was not focused against Machado – it had more revolutionary aims beyond his mere removal from office.

¹³ Crowder to Secretary of State, September 30, 1925, Havana, 837.00/2599.

¹⁴ Havana Post, May 28, 1928, Havana.

¹⁵ L.H. Woolsey in Memorandum for Mr. Ed Wilson, State Department, December 15, 1933, Washington, 837.00 B.

Machado's willingness to allow a healthy domestic organized labor movement contrasts sharply with the battles with his own upper class enemies in Havana. There is no record in the diplomatic archives (which carefully documented Machado's abuses) of any organized attempt or policy to stifle union or labor activity.