FOUR YEARS
BUILDING SOLIDARITY WITH CUBA
This is the first pamphlet in the Venceremos Brigade “Cuba Va” Series, designed to share with those interested in our work, the experiences and activities of the Brigade as well as what we have learned about the Cuban Revolution.

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The Venceremos Brigade is an educational project which since 1969 has directed its efforts toward developing solidarity with the Cuban Revolution and the struggles against U.S. domination in the Third World.

AGAINST TWO BLOCKADES
To do this we have had to defy two blockades: Through the first blockade, the U.S. government has tried to isolate Cuba economically and prevent U.S. citizens from travelling there to see Cuba’s accomplishments for themselves. The Venceremos Brigade has broken this blockade. We have sent more than 2,000 North Americans to Cuba, not just to visit, but to contribute to its development by working in the canefields, the citrus orchards, and in the construction of people’s housing.

The other blockade is less visible but equally relentless: the U.S. government’s attempt to prevent all information about Cuba from reaching the North American people. The successful efforts of the Cuban people and government in building socialism in their country in the face of armed attack, economic aggression, and political isolation by the U.S. have been consistently distorted and suppressed by the agencies of information in this country.

To break this blockade a major part of our work is devoted to conducting educational programs, providing resource materials and exhibiting films, posters, slides and photographs revealing the dramatic achievements of the Cuban Revolution.

The thousands of progressive men and women who have participated in the Brigade have come from all areas of the United States. More than half are Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Asians and Native Americans. United by their commitment to demonstrate their support for the Cuban Revolution not just in words but in hard work, they have come from many political bodies, community groups, trade unions and student organizations. The Brigade has given them a rare opportunity to share experiences and learn from one another.

In Brigade after Brigade the importance of developing this unity more fully back in the United States is driven home by the example of the Cuban people themselves.
THE ROOTS OF THE VENCEREMOS BRIGADE

In the decade of the 60's the fierce contradictions underlying American society could no longer be covered up. Inequality, segregation, oppression, poverty, inflation, repression at home and a brutal, anti-democratic policy abroad produced a social and political upheaval that shook the nation.

We, who participated in the civil rights movement, the battles for self-determination of Black, Chicano, Native American and Puerto Rican people, the student protests, the anti-war movement, the fight for women's liberation, could never again be convinced that our society could be healed without deep and fundamental change. We began to look outside the borders of the United States towards those who were already building societies of justice, equality and human dignity: we were ready to learn from their examples.

Ninety miles from our shores, blockaded and blacked out by the very government whose policies we were learning to question, was Cuba—the only socialist country in the Western Hemisphere. We were willing to actively defy the U.S. government by travelling to Cuba because we knew that the U.S. people in general were now more receptive than ever before to the truth about the Cuban Revolution that we were determined to bring back with us.

It was in this context that the first contingent of the Venceremos Brigade travelled to Cuba.

George Cohen

WORKING AND LEARNING IN CUBA

The first 207 North Americans arrived in Cuba in December 1969. They were to participate in the historic “Ten Million Ton” sugar harvest, a massive national effort to raise enough capital from the sale of sugar to allow Cuba to further develop other areas of its economy: to build more factories, buy new equipment, and diversify agriculture.

To fully appreciate the significance of this effort, the North Americans had to know something about Cuba’s history: why was this enormous effort necessary?

When the Revolution triumphed in 1959, the Cuban people inherited a country almost completely controlled and dominated by the United States. U.S. corporations owned the major industrial, agricultural and utility firms. To protect these economic interests the U.S. Government manipulated the Cuban government almost at will. Rich North Americans had turned Cuba into their “island playground,” creating vast industries around gambling, prostitution and drugs.

For the Cuban people, U.S. control of their natural resources and their lives meant poverty, illiteracy and hopelessness. Before the Revolution most of the agricultural work force was unemployed 9 months of the year; left to live at near starvation level. Less than half of the school-age children attended school. There was only one rural
hospital in all of Cuba. In January 1959 when Fidel Castro marched into Havana at the head of the popular revolutionary forces, the seizure of power opened the way for the Cuban people to develop an independent economy that could meet their needs. The United States had left them a stunted and deformed economy: reconstructing it would be the country's main task for many years.

The North Americans found themselves part of an unprecedented popular mobilization involving almost every Cuban citizen in some way. Cane-cutting, once the most tortuous and degrading occupation a Cuban could have, became a spirited and patriotic effort shared not only by Cubans who had never been in a canefield before but by cane-cutting brigades from all parts of the world.

The Second Venceremos Brigade, which arrived to help complete the Harvest of the Ten Million Tons, brought the largest single contingent of North Americans, over 700, to Cuba in February 1970. Even with this tremendous effort, only 8½ tons of cane were harvested that year (still the largest harvest in Cuban history), underscoring how long and difficult would be the path out of underdevelopment. The spirit in Cuba was not one of defeat; the popular slogan became “Turn Setback into Victory.” The Cuban people directed the same energy and dedication to strengthening other areas of the economy.

The Third contingent of the Venceremos Brigade joined young people from all over Cuba to develop the rich and fertile Isle of Pines, renamed the “Isle of Youth” in honor of those who were turning it into the citrus-producing center of Cuba. The Isle's orchards would yield enough both to supply all of Cuba with oranges, lemons and grapefruit and to export the surplus in exchange for needed capital.

The thousands of young Cubans working on the Isle of Youth gave to the Brigadistas an idea of what Che Guevara meant when he talked about the “new man” that Cuba's Revolution would create. They had left their home towns and families to come to the citrus orchards because they understood that the Revolution needed them there. They worked proudly, offering their talents and abilities to develop their society as a whole, not just for individual gain.

The first four Brigades, through their work in helping to develop Cuba's agriculture, had shared in one aspect of breaking out of underdevelopment—developing the base upon which the country's economy could prosper. But underdevelopment has another face: a miserable standard of living for the vast majority.

By 1970 the Revolution had ensured that every Cuban citizen had a job, clothing, enough to eat, medical care and education. The most difficult material need was still unsolved: the desperate need for decent housing in the city and countryside alike.

Before 1959 most Cubans lived in thatched huts in the countryside called “bohios” (looked upon by rich Yankee tourists as “picturesque”) and in shanty towns near the major cities. These homes were without electricity and plumbing; some in the urban areas were literally constructed from flattened tin cans and cardboard boxes.

Now for the first time the Cuban Revolution had the economic capacity to make the construction of new housing a major priority for the country. It was this effort that the Fifth and Sixth contingents of the Venceremos Brigade contributed.
A TOUR WITHOUT TOURISTS

The two-week trip across Cuba that each Brigade takes after its work period serves to fortify the understanding gained by working side by side with the Cuban people.

In every province the Brigadistas meet the political leaders of the town—the Young Communists and the Cuban Communist Party. There is time to talk with trade union members in the factories, members of the Women's Federation, community members in the local block committees, the Young Pioneers (the children's organization) and even to go into homes and talk with families.

It isn't magic that propels a whole people into volunteer work projects, micro-brigades, school construction-and cane-cutting; that produces a patriotism, expressed not in flag-waving and rhetoric but in getting up at 6 in the morning, enthusiastically and with determination, to build a house for a co-worker. From working, travelling and talking, it becomes clear to every Brigadista that what propels the Cuban people is their involvement at all levels of running their society on a basis of true equality. The vestiges of discrimination and segregation by color and sex, created by Spanish colonialism and U.S. domination, are being decisively pushed out of the society.

The shape of the society to come is formed in the schools of today. The former exclusion of Afro-Cubans and women from the educational system effectively kept them from equal participation in running the country. In 1958 less than half of Cuba's children even attended elementary school. 1972 saw 98.5% of all children enrolled. New schools for over 100,000 students were constructed in 1973 alone.

Many of these were schools of an entirely new type: the Schools in the Countryside. Here an integrated education is being worked out where students attend classes half the day and do agricultural work the other half. Work and study together, the Cubans believe, produce a person fully capable of contributing to a society in which the artificial distinction between manual and mental labor is being eliminated.

WHAT THE BRIGADE MEANS TO CUBA

On May 1, 1973 a singular honor was conferred on the Venceremos Brigade when it was invited to march in Cuba's May Day Parade. This was the first time North Americans had participated in Cuba's celebration marking the world wide day of solidarity for working people.

Having wrested their own freedom from exploitation and foreign domination, the Cuban people deeply identify with those who in other countries are carrying out the same struggle. Though her resources are limited, Cuba has provided economic and personal aid to the people of many other countries.

Before the Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende in Chile was overthrown by a fascist coup, the Cuban people donated a part of their sugar ration, free, to that struggling nation.

They have many times voiced their desire to give, not only their sugar, but if necessary their lives as well, in support of the Vietnamese struggle for sovereignty. At the height of the war, Cuban medical teams travelled to North Vietnam, serving in hospitals and clinics under heavy bombing attacks.

Internationalism is a living force in Cuba today. Cuban towns, clinics and schools bear the names of Vietnamese heroes, Latin American battle sites, martyrs and leaders of liberation movements the world over.

The words and deeds of the Cuban government and people have made it a powerful example of bravery in the face of attack, dignity in the face of slander, and steadfastness before defeats and reversals—to all other nations and people struggling for sovereignty, peace, freedom and socialism.

The Venceremos Brigade is one expression of this spirit. For 4 years it has been the means by which the nation of Cuba expresses its respect an solidarity with us, the North American people.

IN THE U.S.: MAKING THE BRIGADE COUNT

After 2 months away from the U.S., stepping off the Cuban ship onto North American soil has been described by many Brigadistas as stepping back into another world. A world of high prices, neon signs, drugs, unemployment, mafia racketeers, speed-ups, lay-offs, corrupt politicians and a thousand and one daily frustrations. A world of racism, of misery next door to wealth, of millions of people who are simply trying to "make it."

In the midst of this, how do you tell people in Los Angeles, Houston, Atlanta, Chicago and New York about Cuba? How do you get it across that Cuba, a small and underdeveloped country only 90 miles away from Florida has gone as far forward as his country has gone backward in meeting the needs of its people?

Here, the Brigade comes face to face with the web of silence, conscious distortions and lies in the media that have blockaded the people of the U.S. from the reality of Cuba, and prejudiced them
against the revolution that the Cuban people have been building for 15 years.

In fact, for most people across the States, the word Cuba is not associated with 8 million people transforming their society—but with the frightening “Communist spectre” of bearded guerrillas, hijackings, missile bases, etc., etc., etc.

And this is as real a blockade against the U.S. people as the economic blockade against the Cuban people.

It is a blockade that is thrown up not just against Cuba—but also to isolate us from what is happening in other parts of the world, particularly where people are struggling against domination by the U.S. government and corporations. Thus we hear from CBS, NBC and The New York Times such fabrications as that President Allende of Chile committed suicide; that the North Vietnamese are the ones violating the Peace Agreement; that the Bay of Pigs invaders were to be greeted by the Cuban people as their “liberators.”

Today, more and more people are fed up with the tapes, the “phases,” the secret bombings and the astonishing array of “dirty tricks” and downright lies that have been thrust upon us for years. We have seen that many are also fed up with what “informed sources” have been passing off as the truth about the Cuban Revolution. In fact, recent Gallup polls have shown that a majority of people favor the lifting of the economic blockade against Cuba.

Last July’s EXPOCUBA in New York City, sponsored by the Venceremos Brigade and other groups, drew a capacity audience for two days who came to see the largest exhibit on Cuba in this country since 1959.

This is why the Brigade’s educational activities are an important responsibility of each Brigade member—and why the Brigade needs to reach all progressive people interested in Cuba. When Brigadistas return from Cuba, they not only return to work with their organizations, committees and collectives—but also are encouraged to maintain a working year-round relationship with the Brigade in their city.

The Brigade is organized in more than 12 cities around the U.S., in which regional committees carry out educational activities and participate in the selection and preparation of Brigade members for each new contingent. Regional committees are made up of people who have been on the Brigade, meaning that regionals are multi-racial and reflect a diversity of perspectives within the progressive movement. People work because they support the basic objectives of the Brigade, which include developing solidarity with Cuba by breaking the “informational blockade.”

In addition to focusing on Cuba, regional committees celebrate days of solidarity with the Vietnamese people, the people of Guinea-Bissau, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Chile as part of their regular program. Thus, Brigadistas make the fullest use of their experience to attack this invisible blockade of silence and misinformation.

SELECTION

In selecting Brigade members, regional committees begin by actively looking for people involved in many sectors of the progressive movement: student organizers, trade unionists, peace activists, professionals, journalists and researchers, solidarity groups...
for anti-imperialist movements, groups which promote anti-imperialist and/or socialist ideas and people confronting such problems as high prices, poor education, health care, housing, etc. An important part of this effort is aimed at ensuring that the Brigades are multi-racial—that is, that they involve significant participation by Black, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Native American and Asian organizers. A strong emphasis is put in this direction, recognizing the racism that runs rampant in the U.S. today, and the need for the Brigade to play a determined role in fighting against it.

This year, we see the possibility of the Brigade including the participation of people who were, perhaps, not active politically even one year ago: that is, including people who are now fed up with the “Watergate standards” of U.S. political life and the deepening economic crisis and who have begun to do something about it.

We welcome to the Brigade people who are active in the growing popular movement responding to the domestic crisis in the U.S.: people who will open their minds to the Cuban Revolution.

THE NEXT BRIGADE

This year’s Brigade (#7), which leaves for Cuba in the Spring of 1974, will be made up of about 150 people working in different areas of the U.S. movement for social change, and who, at the same time have shown an active interest in Cuba.

Applications for this contingent will be accepted by Brigade regionals in each city until mid-January. After this application is initially ok’d applicants will begin preparing for the trip by participating in an educational program which includes films, basic readings and discussions about Cuba and countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America; fundamentals of Spanish; conversations about the Brigade. During this 11-week program the groups will carry out fundraising projects in case individuals are not able themselves to pay their transportation costs.

Final selections for Brigade members will be made in the early Spring, several weeks before the scheduled departure date, after the group has had a chance to work together and gain a general understanding of the Brigade.

Finally, each local group from around the country will fly to Mexico City, where, meeting for the first time, they will board a Cuban airliner for Havana. Two months later, they will return to the U.S. aboard a Cuban ship via Canada. This necessarily roundabout way of travelling is a persistent reminder of the U.S. economic blockade, which eliminated all direct routes in the early 1960’s.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE VENCEREMOS BRIGADE

The last three years have seen a great upsurge in the people’s movements in Latin America. From the Chilean Popular Unity government to the progressive governments of Argentina and Peru, to the firm stand of the Panamanians against continued U.S. occupation of the Canal Zone, on to the growing mass movements in countries still under U.S. domination, the people of Latin America are moving forcefully against the conditions resulting from their dependent status: high unemployment, inflation, hunger, disease, illiteracy and repression.

The U.S. government continues to intervene in the affairs of Latin America— as witnessed in Chile during the fascist coup of September 11, 1973.

However, the Latin American people have the example of Cuba—full employment, stable prices, the best health care system in the Western Hemisphere, and universal education. Most importantly, a people’s government. Thus, they continue to struggle for a better future, knowing it is possible here and now.

The U.S. government, attempting to maintain its dominant position in Latin America, continues to try to isolate Cuba. Not only from Latin America, but also from the U.S. people.

In the coming years we will see the struggle in Latin America reach ever higher levels. One example is the united anti-fascist resistance formed in Chile after the recent coup, which is growing stronger every day.

The U.S. people have a special responsibility to support these struggles because it is our government which has been the main obstacle to social, political and economic progress in the Latin American countries. We must increase our ability to aid these struggles and demand that the U.S. government no longer interferes in the affairs of other countries.

The Venceremos Brigade plays a primary role in developing this solidarity with the peoples of the world. It is the only project that provides an opportunity for broad sectors of progressive North Americans to visit Cuba and see first hand its battle against underdevelopment and Cuba’s support for the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Brigade focuses its educational work on these struggles, and mobilizes large numbers of people in support of them.

It is within this context that we can say the Venceremos Brigade will continue. We will continue sending progressive people from the U.S. to Cuba. We will continue our educational work around
other national activities of the brigade

The Venceremos Brigade will be publishing a monthly newsletter covering Brigade activities as well as news from Cuba, Cuba-related resources, articles on other countries of Africa, Asia Latin America, and news of other trips to Cuba.

This year, the Brigade will also publish two series of pamphlets—one about revolutionary Cuba (including health, education, and popular democracy)—and a second series about other anti-imperialist movements around the world.

The Brigade will be displaying the exhibits from last summer's EXPOCUBA in different cities around the country during the coming year.

Besides these activities, Brigade organizers will continue to initiate smaller trips to Cuba. In the past, this work has resulted in a journalists' seminar, a delegation of Black organizers, and the now yearly participation of some 15 children (Los Venceremitos, or Little Winners) in the International summer camp at Varadero Beach, Cuba.

If you want additional information about the Brigade, the exhibits, or other trips, please write:

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