

# How Che Guevara should not be commemorated

By Helen Rate

**I**N October 1967 the Bolivian army captured and killed the Argentinian revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Guevara was a central leader of the 1959 Cuban Revolution. They killed Guevara because they feared him. He tried to undo US capitalism's domination of Latin America by starting a continent-wide guerrilla struggle in Bolivia. Guevara and his tiny rag-tag band of idealistic young men probably didn't have a hope in hell of organising a continental revolution. To the US and Latin American ruling classes, however, he represented their worst nightmare. The bullets which tore the life out of the wounded Guevara, quietened that nightmare.

Thirty years on Guevara is once again in vogue. Young people can be seen slouching around Camden Town with Che's image emblazoned on their khaki T-shirted chests. After his death the left, and people far from the left, transformed Guevara into an icon. He came to represent the eternal "youthful rebel" and even for some the twentieth century Communist Jesus Christ. Although it is easy to satirise the inspiration Guevara gave to youth of the Sixties — Wolfie Smith and his Tooting Popular Front is an endearing, if simplistic, depiction of "Guevarism" — Guevara did truly capture the aspirations and hopes of that generation. Socialists should take a serious look at his ideas. Unfortunately the left — Socialist Worker is the worst example — don't seem to be up to the job.

In the 26 July issue of *Socialist Worker* Sam Inman concocts a shallow and opportunistic potted biography of the "great man" by stringing together a series of points, to produce an article, that *misses* the main points.

In 1954 Guevara — then a middle-class rebel without a cause — was in Guatemala during a CIA-organised coup which overthrew the reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz. The government had redistributed land and expropriated the holdings of the US-owned United Fruit company. According to Inman "the main lesson of the coup [for Guevara] was the failure of the Arbenz government to distribute arms to the people."

Guevara *did* criticise Arbenz on this point, but it was a small point compared to the much bigger lesson Guevara learnt. This: if any Latin American government, hostile to American imperialist interests, wanted to stay in power, they would need to completely smash the old state machine and to replace it with a new centralised state apparatus; the state would then be able to mobilise a defence against imperialist powers and any internal friends of imperialism. This is what happened in the Cuban revolution.

Inman's assessment of post-revolutionary Cuban society is woeful — she does not even say whether *Socialist Worker* is in favour of Cuban workers overthrowing Castro's regime. Are they?

When Castro's government — in which



Guevara was in charge of economic planning — nationalised Cuba's economy and expropriated US sugar plantations and processing plants, relations with the US became increasingly hostile. The Cubans then moved closer to the USSR. Inman says "Guevara began to see that unless the Cuban Revolution was internationalised it would be stifled by its growing dependence on the USSR." However, Inman doesn't draw out what Cuba's "dependence", what it's "Sovietisation", would mean and what Guevara really thought of it.

- The Cuban's model of political "democracy" became very Soviet: in other words there was *no* democracy. At best the government conducted consultation exercises where decisions were conveyer-belted from the top (a political elite) to the bottom (the masses).

- By the mid-'60s the regime was a hardened Stalinist formation. Does the word "Stalinism" not form part of Inman's lexicon?

- There is no doubt Guevara believed in equality — he refused privileges for himself and objected to the privileges of the Soviet bureaucracy. He had some principles. However he never questioned the lack of political democracy in Cuba.

Inman's silence on these "deficiencies" of the Cuban revolution and Guevara is astounding. Who is she frightened of offending?

Guevara wanted to spread the fight against the US. Inman's comments on Che's internationalism are that his general principle of internationalism is right (we would agree) but his "method" was wrong. But everything implied by Che's use of the "method", the guerrilla tactic was also wrong! The key weakness in Guevara's politics was that he did not see the proletariat as the agent of revolutionary change. Inman does not make this explicit in her article. She only says that workers and socialists were "mistrusted" by Guevara.

A rounded assessment of Guevara's ideas must include a discussion about the importance of working-class struggle in Latin America

both during and after Che's life — from the tin mines of Bolivia to the formation of the Brazilian Workers' Party — and how workers' organisation will be the key to change in Latin America. Guevara did not understand this and Inman does not, apparently, see the significance of these issues.

But socialists do need a realistic assessment of guerrilla warfare as a tactic, as a *method*. It might be an effective form of struggle in some parts of Latin America, whatever the political content of the fight. Against a military dictatorship there may be a need for military operations including clandestine, "terrorist" operations.

Though Guevara's method may be right in certain circumstances, the arguments Guevara used to justify his method were certainly not compatible with working-class politics.

Inman's pitching for the Camden Town Guevarists of '97 ends with opportunistic glorification: "But if the US could murder Guevara, they could not kill the influence of revolutionary ideas." Yes, but there are all sorts of "revolutionary ideas". Marxists should want to know the class genealogy of "revolutionary ideas". Mao Tse Tung (with whom incidentally Guevara had a certain affinity) was a revolutionary; do we therefore endorse this Stalinist totalitarian's ideas?

The SWP are habitually vague on this point for their own catchpenny opportunistic reasons. In the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s they used the slogan, "one solution, revolution". This helped them to appear to be the most fanatic ANC supporters whilst being formally opposed to the ANC and South African Communist Party's concept of a two-stage revolution in South Africa.

Inman should have saved herself the trouble of bodging up this bit of opportunistic fluff and simply addressed her readers thus: "you've got the T-shirt and you think Che equals cool... why not join the Socialist Workers' Party?"

The mood of the times in which Che lived was formed by the real possibility of fighting back against the ruling class and its system of exploitation. One sad fact about the resurrection of Che as a demi-god is that this mood does not exist today. In recent months the SWP has suggested that a mass, confident movement for change can be built quite quickly (building on the expectations British workers have in Blair for instance). Perhaps in the SWP's falsely described political they don't need to say what they really think about symbolic rebels such as Che Guevara...

For me the most moving illustration of what Che Guevara stood for came during his doomed Bolivian expedition. Inspired by Guevara's daring and in disgust at government propaganda against him, Bolivian tin miners, trade unionists and students staged protests against the military dictatorship — the first since the military coup of 1964. In this way Guevara was a catalyst for change.

# Che Guevara Shot in Bolivia October 1967, aged 39

By Alan Bold

"Wherever death may surprise us, it will be welcome, provided that this, our battle cry, reach some receptive ear, that another hand stretch out to take up weapons and that other men come forward to intone our funeral dirge with the staccato of machine guns and new cries of battle and victory."

I never knew the man  
As a man, only as an image  
Reflecting the stricken part of a  
continent,  
As a spectre haunting Europe.  
I never met him or had to face  
The fervent fanatical eyes, the sure set  
Mouth, the pride, strength and  
arrogance.

I know of him as self-styled custodian  
Of a million broken lives.

The facts of his life are as obscure  
As those that tell of his death.  
We know that bullets were involved  
In both, that there were ruthless choices  
Between friends and enemies; both  
Involving death. We know too  
That a sense of helplessness engulfed  
Many at his death; that elation  
Gripped others. And so  
The struggle was a real one, precipitated  
By callous acts of lifelong murder, not  
created  
Gratuitously by a reckless man of action  
bent  
On fun and martyrdom. He saw  
Unforgettable conditions of degradation  
And drew certain conclusions.

Gone are the visions of lakes  
Proliferating with golden perch  
And a bright swan arching before a  
palace  
In Europe soaked in sunlight  
And the richness of love  
And the triumph of sex.  
Silent is the accordion  
Squeezing out maudlin songs composed  
Of broken hearts and gone too the  
amber drink  
Lingered over at sunset. Instead  
The present  
Becomes a hammer to forge a future  
Uncontaminated by the past,  
Existence becomes an urgent act of war  
The mind a tactic  
The body a blast.

The earth monotonously orbiting the  
sun  
The insect dying underfoot  
Are unavoidable phenomena and mean  
There is sourness mixed up with the  
sweet.

But the use of hard cash to reduce men  
Constructs suffering of another kind

That is inevitable only when  
You and I pretend we are blind.

With Che these eyes were wrenched  
open  
So their owners could use these eyes  
And know that strength depends on  
belief  
And that guns are more potent than  
cries.

Where were you on the day he died?

His life makes sense  
Only as a refutation of a cosmic  
indifference  
From Argentina to Bolivia  
From Cuba to the Valle Grande.

I know many would have advised him  
To come off it, to forget it,  
To live a happy life. (What  
Do they know about happiness!)  
To remain Doctor  
Ernesto Guevara.  
Yes, there would be  
Somewhere  
The fading record of a tidy time on earth  
spent  
Serving others. Instead I hear  
The echo of a roar  
And he lives on as a cause not a corpse  
Inspiring people to demonstrate.  
Revolt rebel  
(Translate imitate emulate)  
Retrieve retreat repeat  
And reluctantly serving  
As a synonym for courage.

But a body heavy with bullets,  
A face frozen at the instant of  
obliteration,  
These alone are not credentials.  
Saint John Fitzgerald Kennedy himself  
was blessed  
With the posthumous halo granted  
The victim of assassination. In death  
He was loved even by those who had  
cursed  
His own assassination attempt on Cuba  
Two young men but one meaning  
What he said.  
The manner of that celebrated  
presidential death  
Was ghastly certainly: shattered flesh,  
the moan  
Of a baffled wife, the red blood dizzying  
Into black.  
But how do you think they die  
In Vietnam Bolivia Detroit?  
Alone, dreadfully, losing  
The little their life gave. No flowers  
In life, few in death, but dirt  
And the occasional unmarked grave.  
Death by presidential decree,  
Such death is a cool presidential decision  
And endorsed by almost all.

What were you doing on the day he  
died?

Son of an architect from Buenos Aires  
Who surpassed him at that  
Whose forebears fled to California from  
a dictator  
Who destroyed one  
Whose research was in tropical disease  
allergies  
Who developed one  
And then on  
To Guatemala and Mexico and Castro.

Argentine medico, doctor, major  
"commander of all rebel units  
of the 26th of July Revolutionary  
Movement  
that operate in the Province of Las Villas,  
in both the rural and the urban zones"  
Does it begin to add up?  
In the Sierra Maestra  
A shoe factory, a uniform factory,  
A knapsack factory, ordnance plants,  
Bakeries and butcher shops,  
Hospitals: revolutionary odds  
And ends.  
A camp in Manzanillo,  
A hurricane, swollen feet,  
Food from coconut trees,  
Movement in the sugar cane fields,  
A railroad junction,  
The fall of Sancti Spiritus

Castro's ride into Havana.  
So much is history  
Of a kind.

And Guevara — for him Cuba  
Was only the beginning, the first  
Glimpse of the focus, tentative  
Evidence of achievement.  
So it was on  
Eventually  
To death  
And he thought it worth dying for.

And now  
His face plastered on placards  
His name reverently dripping from so  
many lips  
Mean what you make of them.  
Every age needs a hero  
And he is not a bad one  
Or an empty idol.  
I can see him now  
Because the equipment,  
The fine noble face and youthful body,  
Is endurable stuff.  
And I never knew the man  
As a man.

Did you sleep well on the night he died?  
Did you sleep well?  
Where were you?  
What were you doing?