How Che Guevara should not be commemorated

By Helen Rate

In October 1967 the Bolivian army captured and killed the Argentine 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 constant-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 skulking 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 — Wolfe Smith and his Tooting Poplar Front is an enduring, 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 Sun Inman concocted 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 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 conveyed-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.

Through 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 pitch for the Camden Town Guevarists of '97 ends with opportunistic glorification: "But if the US could order 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 revolutionist, 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 fanatical 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 boding up this bit of opportunistic stuff and simply addressed her readers thus: "You've got the T-shirt and you think Che equals cool... why not join the Socialists' 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 clation
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
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 underground
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
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 medic, 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?