

Jesús Menéndez Larrondo: undisputed labor leader

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ABSTRACT

The essay is based on a historical scientific result. Its main purpose is to expose the life and attitude of Jesús Menéndez Larrondo to the cause of the proletariat and his unconditional vital action as a communist militant. Theoretical methods were used: analysis and synthesis, abstraction and generalization of the historical, inductive-deductive, historical-logical and historical-chronological. In the empirical: review of documents and testimonies. It can be used as material of deepening in the teaching-learning process of Cuban History in universities, in the improvement of professors, teachers, union, partisan and administrative leaders.

Keywords: Worker; Leader; Unionist; Communist.

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Introduction

The present essay is part of a historical scientific result that deals with the life and work of Jesús Menéndez Larrondo, the General de las Cañas, one of the most relevant figures

of Cuban History for his outstanding participation in the activities of Cuban workers in order to obtain economic, social and political improvements. These reasons led the authors to investigate Menéndez's life and attitude of dedication to the cause of the proletariat and his unconditional vital action as a communist militant. Hence, the historical importance of the subject under study.

The research results are synthetically exposed in this essay at the service of those interested in the deepening of Cuban History, especially in what refers to the struggles of the Cuban proletariat during the 20th century, both in the academic field of universities in the teaching-learning process and in the improvement of professors and teachers, as well as in the preparation and improvement of union, partisan and administrative leaders. For these reasons, the following objectives are stated:

- To deepen in the study of the actions of Jesús Menéndez Larrondo as one of the leaders of the Cuban proletariat.
- To demonstrate the exemplary attitude of Jesús Menéndez Larrondo to contribute to the unity of the workers.
- To argue the reasons why he is considered a man of the Communist Party.

A system of methods, procedures and forms of historical research work was used, based on the methodological interpretation provided by Historical Materialism and on the dialectic combination of theoretical methods, such as: analysis and synthesis, abstraction and generalization of the historical, inductive-deductive, historical-logical and historical-chronological, fundamental in all research of this type. Likewise, empirical methods based on the sources of obtaining historical knowledge were used, such as the revision of documents for the search of written sources (documents, press and bibliographic materials) and testimonies as oral sources.

Hypothesis: The syndicalist and communist actions of Jesús Menéndez offer possibilities to value him as an indisputable worker leader of the proletarian struggles of the 20th century in Cuba.

Development

Jesús Menéndez Larrondo was born on the La Palma farm in a humble hut two kilometers from Encrucijada, in the present-day province of Villa Clara, on December 11, 1911. He was the penultimate of the twelve children of the couple formed by the black peasants Carlos Menéndez and Adela Larrondo. He came from a family of mambisa lineage, his grandfather fought in the Great War and in the War of Independence he participated with his son Carlos.

Since he was a child he knew the hardships of the Cuban peasants during the Neocolonial Republic and was the object of discrimination because of his black and poor condition. He attended rural elementary school intermittently in the area where he lived, since he worked on the family farm and sold the products harvested in Encrucijada. When he lost his mother at the age of eleven, he went to live with an aunt in the town, where he continued his elementary studies alternating them with work as a peddler of fish and other products to help support the family.

During that stage of his life he attended the urban public school, but he was only able to study up to the fourth grade. In 1924, when he was only 13 years old, he definitively abandoned his studies and went to work as a machetero in the sugar cane colonies of Central Nazábal. In 1927, when he was sixteen years old, he worked as a retranquero in the Nazábal railroads and the following year he worked as a sugar purger at the Nazábal sugar mill, as a substitute. In that environment he was forged as a workers' leader, he founded the union of that sugar factory in 1930; as a result of his responsibilities he organized combative actions and led the workers to strike. For this reason he was fired, denounced and imprisoned for the first time in his life.

The precarious economic situation of his family forced him to look for work in places far from Encrucijada during the so-called dead time. He worked in the tobacco sector, in tobacco plantations in Vueltas, Cabaiguán, Taguasco and Zaza del Medio, where he also developed activities to confront the bosses' exploitation. During those years he united his struggle for economic demands with the actions against Machado's tyranny (1925 - 1933). His prestige as a workers' leader grew among the sugar and tobacco workers.

In the midst of the terror unleashed by Machado and during the world economic crisis of 1929-1933, Jesús Menéndez Larrondo organized and promoted the workers' struggle in a masterful way; his actions as leader of the workers' masses in the areas and sectors where he worked allowed him to become a local and regional leader in the former province of Santa Clara. In 1932, in the midst of the Machado dictatorship, he was one

of the organizers of the Hunger Marches held during Christmas of that year, which were successful in Encrucijada and Santa Clara. Since the previous year (1931) he joined the ranks of the Communist Party.

For those who knew him, Jesús Menéndez Larrondo was a man of the Communist Party who learned from the example of the Marxist-Leninists of his time. His decision to become a communist militant was influenced by other young people willing to fight for the social revolution, among them: Celestino Hernández Robau and Nicolás Monzón, the first one poor and mestizo, a student of Medicine at the University of Havana who had been linked to the University Student Federation (FEU) and to the struggles deployed at the university by Julio Antonio Mella; Monzón has been identified as the first communist in Cuba.

Among the actions of struggle waged by Menéndez from 1932 onwards, his participation as delegate of Encrucijada to the First National Conference of Sugar Industry Workers stands out. O'Farril et al. (2010) explained that it was held clandestinely in the city of Santa Clara on December 26 and 27, 1932, where the National Union of Sugar Industry Workers (SNOIA) was formed. Later, Menéndez registered the Central Constancia union in that union organization.

Workers' struggles increased at the end of Machado's tyranny and during the period following his fall (August 12). In the middle of the dictatorship, in February 1933, a strike movement began in the Central Nazábal that concluded with the workers taking over the factory, an action made possible by the strength of the workers' and communist organizations of Encrucijada where Jesús Menéndez Larrondo was an outstanding figure. The activity developed in Nazábal was "the first attempt to constitute a soviet in Cuba and although it did not have the expected success it was fundamental for the constitution of this type of local government in the period after the fall of Machado" (O'Farril et al, 2010, p. 178).

In the midst of a deep national crisis, the figure of Jesús Menéndez took on national dimensions. In 1934 he was a delegate to the IV Congress of Workers, known as Trade Union Unity and from that moment on, clandestine partisan tasks were intertwined with workers' actions. He stood out in the conflict between the cigar workers and the workers of the Trinidad y Hermanos ranchuelera factory. The unquestionable leader suffered persecution and imprisonment.

In 1938 he was elected general secretary of the Federation of Workers of the province of Santa Clara. By that date, a democratic opening had begun in Cuba, the communists were able to participate in the public life of the country. Jesús Menéndez had the possibility of helping his party, already legalized under the name of Unión Revolucionaria Comunista (Revolutionary Communist Union). His actions as a workers' leader contributed to his national fame.

On August 21, 1939, the National Sugar Workers Congress was held in Camagüey. The meeting was attended by 113 delegates, representatives of the 78 industrial and agricultural unions of the sector; 21 delegates were present from the former province of Santa Clara, among them Jesús Menéndez. One of the most important results of the meeting was the constitution of the Federación Nacional Azucarera (FNA), which almost immediately changed its name to Federación Nacional Obrera Azucarera (FNOA), direct heir of the SNOIA founded in 1932. The FNOA had General de las Cañas as vice-secretary.

During the electoral campaign for delegates to the Constituent Assembly, Jesús Menéndez developed an intense activity aimed at explaining the political program of his party and to carry out a promotion of affiliates in that organization with the objective of aspiring to form part of the delegates to that assembly which would take place at the end of 1939. In the elections to determine the representation of the province of Santa Clara in the Constituent Convention, Menéndez remained as alternate of his Party, since Juan Marinello Vidaurreta was elected as delegate.

Also in those years he had an active participation together with Lázaro Peña in the foundational works of the Confederation of Cuban Workers, (CTC) constituted in the Workers' Congress held in Havana from January 23 to 28, 1939. Jesús Menéndez stood out more and more as a proletarian leader, his charismatic personality, the seriousness and courage of his actions together with his simplicity and sense of solidarity contributed to the growth of his popularity. This did not prevent him from helping the formation of new leading cadres, on the contrary, he encouraged their promotion.

Between 1939 and 1940 he supported the activities of the peasants in their struggle against abuses and evictions and as a member of the Executive Committee of the CTC was in favor of collective bargaining agreements in places that had conditions for them. At the end of 1939, the sugar workers achieved wage improvements, paid rest and in

some plants contributed with contributions to the Spanish people, immersed in the civil war.

In the 1940 general elections, Jesús Menéndez was elected representative to the Chamber of Deputies of the province of Las Villas for the Communist Revolutionary Union Party. There he made the following demands: the sugar withdrawal, the legalization of the unions, the establishment of commercial relations with the Soviet Union and the participation of the workers in the harvest regulations; he also advocated the implementation of the complementary laws of the 1940 Constitution. The results of his proposals were not completely successful and feasible due to the existing bourgeois obstacles.

In 1941 the young and humble labor leader assumed the general secretariat of the FNOA, under his leadership the Federation extended its participation to other types of sugar workers such as office employees and other facilities, as well as technical personnel. This unitary and broad opening was the basis for the change of the Federation's name to the National Federation of Sugar Workers (FNTA). From 1942 onwards, it devoted itself entirely to the national work of the sugar sector, and at the same time promoted the Sugar Magazine, the official organ of the sugar workers, in charge of disseminating their most pressing problems.

With his undoubted work in parliament, he achieved the adoption of decrees to favor the workers. However, his most important battle was the payment of the sugar differential, carried out when the conditions for the amplitude of the struggle fronts were over, after the defeat of fascism and the culmination of World War II in 1945.

During the war years, the United States carried out commercial measures aimed at regulating and controlling the prices of sugar sales in the world market, Cuba sold products to the United States at low prices, mainly sugar. At the end of the war, the Cubans expected the Americans to compensate Cuba's performance with favorable prices. However, the Americans wanted to increase their abuses through lucrative business deals.

For these reasons, the Americans proposed to the Cuban government to buy the entire 1946 and 1947 harvests from them at low and fixed prices as they had done during the war, despite the fact that at that time the existing prices in the world market were higher. Between 1945 and 1946, lengthy talks were held to negotiate the sale of the harvests.

The Cuban sugar magnates offered little resistance to the Yankee plans; they proposed to accept the purchase of the harvests at 3.675 cents per pound, without taking into consideration that the commercialization of a pound of sugar was at 7 cents per pound.

Faced with the cowardly position of the dependent oligarchy, the workers, led by Jesús Menéndez, rose up. The pressure exerted by the popular masses forced the President of the Republic, Ramón Grau San Martín, to authorize the participation of the sugar leader in the negotiations held in Washington. Menéndez counted on the advice of the famous economist Jacinto Torres, FNTA advisor.

The Cuban workers' proposal established an automatic link between the price indexes of sugar exported from Cuba to the United States and the price of supplies received in the country from North America, measured by the official index of the cost of food in that nation. The most favorable one for Cuba would be taken, so that the price of Cuban sugar would increase in direct proportion to the growth of the prices of imported goods. This mechanism would make it possible to defend against U.S. inflation and the loss of the real purchasing power of sugar exports. In spite of imperialism's delaying tactics, the Cuban sugar workers firmly maintained their demands.

In 1946, Cuba managed to place 250,000 tons of sugar on the world market. The government paid Cuban producers the price of 3.575 cents per pound in order to resell it at 7 cents, the price established worldwide. This operation provided the country with profits of approximately 25 million pesos that would be destined for social works and would also serve to cushion the rise in the prices of food products, but in practice the profit effects were diminished as a result of the great corruption that reigned during the authentic government of Grau San Martín.

At the beginning of July, the presidential envoy of the United States arrived in Cuba with the mission of definitively closing the purchase agreement, but it did not come to fruition, since the force deployed by the Cuban sugar growers and their undisputed leader made itself felt. On July 11, 1946, the sugar sales contract was signed, fixing the price at 3,675 cents, but at the same time guaranteeing the establishment of a correlation between the price of sugar and the cost of living and food indices in the United States.

In this way, the country was protected from the effects of possible increases in the prices of food and raw materials imported from that power. This treatment is known as the Guarantee Clause and the difference in prices between those fixed by the United

States for the purchase of sugar and what should be paid to Cuba, based on the world market price, would then be paid to the workers, which was called the sugar differential.

At the end of 1946, "the differential was 37 million pesos, of which 29 million went directly to the workers as salary increases; the remaining millions were distributed among the colonists and the execution of social works" (Menéndez, 1946). In the 1947 harvest, the price of sugar rose to 4.925 cents per pound, workers' salaries were increased and around 140 million pesos became part of the Cuban economy.

In spite of the benefits of the sugar differential, the owners of the sugar mills, the big North American companies and the representatives of the Cuban dependent oligarchy opposed the retribution, they did not accept that the benefits passed to the workers and were used in works of social welfare. According to these great magnates, everything should be paid to them, since they were the owners; they also argued that the payment of the differential and the Guarantee Clause affected the protection of the principles of private property.

The bourgeoisie used the press to confuse the people and present Jesús Menéndez as a public enemy; they took advantage of the persecution of communists deployed by the cold war policy applied in Cuba in the post-war period. For that reason, the aforementioned campaigns were linked to the division of the labor and trade union movement, headed by Eusebio Mujal, to slander the work of the FNTA and undermine Menéndez's leadership. Together with these reactionary maneuvers, the United States government pressured President Grau San Martín to suppress the Guarantee Clause, which was arbitrarily carried out in August 1947.

Jesús Menéndez toured the sugar mills to clarify the situation and to demand compliance with the application of the Guarantee Clause and the payment of the sugar differential. He made direct contact with the sugar workers, oriented them and explained the existing situation; men and women were attentive to his messages in spite of the fact that the rallies were attacked by the military forces. The position of the workers showed the firm unity of the sugar workers and their General de las Cañas.

In the VI Congress of the FNTA the actions of the foreign monopolies, the actions of the divisionists and those of the government of Grau San Martín were denounced. At the closing of the congress, Menéndez explained that not even an inch could be given in the collection of the differential and expressed: "It has to be paid up to the last cent.

Because as some comrades said: "That differential will have to be put at the tip of the bucket". (Vignier and Alonso, 1973, p. 16).

During the month of January 1948 the activity was intense, Jesús Menéndez held rallies from the province of Havana to the province of Oriente. On the 22nd he spoke at the Mabay (Arquímedes Colina) and Estrada Palma (Bartolomé Masó) power stations.

He left for Manzanillo and found Captain Joaquín Casillas waiting for him on the train, they had a conversation on the way. Menendez told him that he would get off the train in Manzanillo and could not be detained, since it was his right as a representative to the House of Representatives with full parliamentary immunity, as established in the Constitution of the Republic. For his part, Captain Casillas, enraged, insisted on arresting him and taking him to the barracks, but the workers' leader did not obey him, he was about to continue on his way when the murderous henchman shot him in the back. His death was almost instantaneous, he could not receive medical assistance.

In fulfillment of his duty to the homeland and to his comrades in struggle, the great sugar leader died and his corpse was taken to Havana. According to García Galló (1998), his funeral was the largest popular demonstration ever held in Cuba and the mourning farewell was in charge of Blas Roca Calderío, general secretary of the Popular Socialist Party, the name adopted by the Cuban communists in 1942.

Conclusions

Jesús Menéndez Larrondo is and will be an eternal companion in the struggle of humble and revolutionary men.

This humble black peasant turned sugar and tobacco worker, undisputed leader and eternal hero of the country fought for the freedom and welfare of those who lived and were, in turn, victims of poverty and injustice.

The sugar differential, a great battle fought by General de las Cañas benefited the sugar workers, but harmed the interests of the national oligarchy and imperialism, so they ordered its suppression and the execution of its precursor.

The short and fruitful life of the sugar leader is for all, an example to follow as part of the Party's claim to which he dedicated all his strength and intelligence. Reason that justifies, to continue the analysis of the different facets of his life as an urgent task for historians.