

## **A Different Kind of Revolution: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign**

Prepared by Adam Stevens from "Perspectives on the Cuban National Literacy Campaign"  
by Ruth Supko, Arkansas State University, <http://168.96.200.17/ar/libros/lasa98/Supko.pdf>

In September, 1960, Fidel Castro announced to the United Nations General Assembly that "the largest military fortresses today house tens of thousands of students, and, in the next year, our people plan to wage a great battle against illiteracy with the ambitious goal of teaching every last illiterate person to read and write. . . Cuba will be the first country in America which . . . will be able to say that it does not have a single illiterate person." Revolutions are not only about winning wars. They are also about transforming societies. How in the world did Castro plan to live up to such a bold promise and did Cuba achieve it? You decide. But first, read on!

Before the Cuban revolution, wealthy families usually sent their children to elite private schools or to study abroad, while children of the rural working class attended vastly inferior public schools or lived too far from schools to attend at all. In 1959, illiteracy in the countryside was an estimated 41% (illiteracy is defined as unable to read at a first grade level). When Castro's troops entered Havana in January 1959, many of the soldiers were illiterate. Army headquarters, camps, and police stations immediately became centers for literacy. By February literacy training for all military personnel began on a wide scale. A special census to locate people who could not read and write was begun in November 1960. By August 1961, 985,000 illiterates were identified across the country. In December, 1960, Fidel Castro declared, "Why have we proposed to eradicate illiteracy in only one year? Because the revolution is developing its work as fast as possible and it is pushing forward very fast. . . One year will be enough . . . revolutions are capable of doing things like that."

The Cuban government believed the ideal teacher-to-student ratio was one-to-two but with almost a million illiterates identified a ratio of one-to-four was settled on. Where would 250,000 volunteers be found to live and work with so many illiterate people in a nation of under seven million? Between April and December, 1961, 268,420 literacy teachers joined illiterate farm workers in their homes, often working in the fields with their students by day and teaching them by lantern-light at night.

The literacy campaign operated on two basic premises: 1) If illiterates are to be found among the people, so are those who can teach literacy, and 2) Those who know more must teach those who know less. One hundred thousand of the literacy "brigadistas" were student volunteers, almost all between the ages of ten and nineteen. These youth were joined by 178,000 adult literacy workers and 30,000 factory workers who volunteered to help in the campaign.

In January, 1961, Castro announced that all high schools would close on April 15 and that literacy volunteers would be taken from those who had completed a sixth grade education or better. Student volunteers generally came from more comfortable urban backgrounds. Each literacy worker was equipped with two books, a pair of boots, two pairs of socks, an olive-green beret, two pairs of pants, two shirts, a shoulder patch worn as a reminder of a literacy worker who had been slain by counter-revolutionaries, and a blanket to sleep on. A modern gas lantern was issued to each worker to facilitate night classes. By the end of the summer in 1961, an army of 268,420 literacy workers had begun work, but only about ten percent of those who could not read had passed their literacy test.

Disappointed by these results, the Cuban government decided to delay the opening of the new school year from September to January to allow the student volunteers to continue their work. Teachers who had refused to volunteer were assigned to literacy work from September to January. In effect, Cuba's schools remained closed for eight months in 1961. Adults who had particular trouble passing the literacy test were brought to special acceleration camps where they were taught by more experienced teachers for days at a time. Special study coaches were

sent to adult learners who could not come to the camps. Once every member of a family was certified literate, that family could hang a red flag above the doorway to their house. Once all the houses in a town were certified, the town itself could raise a larger red flag, to signify that it was free of illiteracy. The first town to raise such a flag was Melena del Sur on November 5, 1961.

On December 22, 1961, at a mass rally in Havana's Plaza de la Revolution, Fidel Castro declared the entire island of Cuba a Territory Free of Illiteracy. The one-year campaign helped 707,212 Cubans become literate. Even the harshest critics of Castro and communism admitted that an exceptional educational feat had occurred in Cuba.