

## *Che: The Heroic Guerrilla*

A personal note by Michael Ratner

I was a college and law student during the 1960s. It was the generation of the civil rights struggle, the movement against the war in Vietnam and the era of black liberation and the Panthers. The Cuban revolution had occurred a few years earlier and for many of us seeking to change our society, Cuba was a desirable model. And it was Che Guevara, more than any other figure, who embodied both that revolution and solidarity with peoples fighting to be free from U.S. hegemony. Many of us had on our walls the poster of Che with his famous quote: "Let me say, at the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love." It was a sentiment that combined what many of us in the 1960s were feeling: the need for revolutionary change with the need for compassion. Che has remained my hero ever since.

In 1976 I went on a Venceremos Brigade to Cuba where I worked on a construction project. After eight weeks of very difficult work, the Cubans took us on a vacation. One day of that vacation was spent hiking in the Sierra Maestra; we took a 30- or 40-kilometer walk following Che's path into the mountains. The Cubans, of course, left nothing to chance. They wanted no injury to befall us. There were doctors in front and behind; other Cubans carried water and at various points men were macheteing open coconuts and handing them to us as we passed. But it was still a very hot, exhausting and difficult hike. As we reached the top of a mountain, I could hear children singing. I could not believe it. What were they singing and why were they there? As I walked past I saw 40 or 50 neatly uniformed children standing in front of a school high in the mountains. These were the children of the revolution. Each was holding a handwritten placard and singing the words written thereon: "Seremos como el Che." "We will be like Che." Tears streamed down my cheeks, my energy was renewed and I completed the hike. To be like Che: To be selfless, to make a family of one's comrades, to give up comfort and material gain for the revolution, to risk and probably give one's life to free humanity.

I bumped into Che in many other places in Cuba. One evening our brigade arrived in the beautiful, white-washed city of Santiago. I wandered the darkened streets and saw lights on in one shop. I walked in; it was a chess parlor. On the wall opposite the door was an oil portrait of Che playing chess; it was not portrait size, but was huge and covered the wall. A few days later we returned to Havana in time to participate in the May Day parade; we marched in the Plaza de la Revolución in front of the huge portrait of Che on a major building. But Che also appeared in miniature. There was a beauty shop in our Havana hotel; it was an exemplary beauty shop. That year it had won the award of the Heroic Guerrilla and a small picture of Che was emblazoned on the certificate displayed in the shop window.

In 1988, twenty-one years after Che Guevara's death, I spent two months in Bolivia with my family. Prior to my trip I read everything I could get my hands on about Che in Bolivia. I knew the names of the peasants Che had befriended and I learned as much as I could about the area in southern Bolivia where Che had fought. My intention was to travel the route Che had traveled.

Our apartment in La Paz was a block or so from the university, a university which, like many in Latin America, was a center of radical political activity. At the university, Che had not been forgotten. Painted on an entire wall of the main courtyard was a portrait of Che.

Where Che had fought was far from La Paz. The roads were not paved and it would take days to get there. I would need supplies and a guide. But first I would need a good map of that area of Bolivia, one that showed roads and small towns. I went to the one and only map store in La Paz and asked to buy a map of the area near the Río Ñacahuazú — the locale where Che made the first entry in his diary. The clerk was polite and explained that she had no such map; that area was still a security zone and maps of that zone could not be obtained. I was stunned. More than twenty years had passed since Che's death, but the Bolivian authorities were still terrified of him. Che lives on.