

Cuban Workers for the CMEA: Reconstructing the Cuban Perspective and Reflecting on How to Evaluate Outcomes

Claudia Martínez Hernández

ABSTRACTS

Thousands of Cuban workers went to the European member-states of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), more precisely Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, and Bulgaria, between 1978 and 1990. Cuban archives allow to reconstruct those Cuban experiences with state-party-led labour programmes in the context of the CMEA and reveals the potential of these programmes for the personal development of its participants. The main research findings emphasize the importance of the CMEA context, the understanding of the development purposes, and main paths to evaluate the results of labour programmes between Cuba and CMEA countries from the Cuban perspective.

Tausende von kubanischen Arbeitnehmern gingen zwischen 1978 und 1990 in die europäischen Mitgliedsstaaten des Rates für gegenseitige Wirtschaftshilfe (RGW), genauer gesagt in die Tschechoslowakei, die Deutsche Demokratische Republik, Ungarn und Bulgarien. Archive in Kuba ermöglichen es, die kubanischen Erfahrungen mit den von der Staatspartei durchgeführten Programmen der Arbeitskräftemigration im Rahmen des RGW zu rekonstruieren und das Potenzial dieser Programme für die persönliche Entwicklung der Teilnehmer aufzuzeigen. Die Forschungsergebnisse heben die Bedeutung des RGW-Kontextes hervor, machen den Zusammenhang zu den Entwicklungszielen deutlich und weisen auf die wichtigsten Ansätze zur Bewertung der Ergebnisse der Arbeitskräftemigrationsprogramme zwischen Kuba und den RGW-Ländern aus kubanischer Perspektive hin.

1. Introduction

A new generation of historians is revisiting the history of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) from a global perspective, moving away from its Cold War competition focus.¹ Considering the concept of labour within such a global perspective, many specialists, consultants and trainees, among others, who circulated in the spatial order of the CMEA, can be studied as temporary labour migrants. Christina Schwenkel reflects about the need to analyse how those human flows took place. She questions the supposed socialist immobility, inwardness, and constraint in contrast with the capitalist mobility, externality, newness, and release.² Berthold Unfried highlights that the sending and education of professionals and trainees played a much larger role than economic benefits.³

The implications of Cuba's participation in these migratory flows – as a non-European, “underdeveloped” country and full member of the CMEA – are not yet well explored, particularly from a Cuban perspective.⁴ This article will delve into these elements through the study of the temporary state-party-led labour programme through which thousands of young Cuban workers were sent to Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) from 1978 on and to Hungary and Bulgaria in 1981 and 1986 respectively.⁵ Although there are no official statistics, some total numbers of participants in the Cuban labour programme in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s have been estimated. Czechoslovakia received approximately 23,000 young Cuban workers between 1978 and 1990.⁶ In the same time period, the GDR hosted between 27,000 and 28,000 young Cuban workers.⁷ Between 1981 and 1990, Hungary received approximately about 4,000 Cuban worker-trainees.⁸ Between 1986 and 1987, about 3,000 Cubans went to Bul-

1 See U. Müller, Introduction: Failed and Forgotten? New Perspectives on the History of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, in: U. Müller and D. Jajesiak-Quast (eds.), *Comecon revisited: Integration in the Eastern Bloc and Entanglements with the Global Economy*, Leipzig 2017 (=Comparativ: Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung 27 [2017] 5/6), p. 8.

2 C. Schwenkel, Rethinking Asian Mobilities. Socialist Migration and Postsocialist Repatriation of Vietnamese Contract Workers in East Germany, in: *Critical Asian Studies* 2 (2014), p. 240.

3 B. Unfried, Intercontinental Labor Migration within the Socialist World. Cuban Contract Laborers in the German Democratic Republic, 1975 to 1990, in: *Yearbook of Transnational History* 5 (2022), pp. 131–173.

4 “Underdeveloped” country was the Cuban terminology. The current research project “Entanglements Cuba-GDR: mobilities, exchanges, circulations within the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA)” at the University of Vienna investigates the Cuban labour programme including the Cuban perspective, <https://socialist-entanglements.univie.ac.at/en/> (accessed 11 January 2024).

5 When we refer to ‘state and party-led mobilities’, our intention is to emphasize a clear distinction regarding the degree of participation and control exercised by Cuban institutions in the mentioned mobility programmes. This concept, in conjunction with the concept of the ‘Cuban government abroad’, highlights the significance of structures created by the Cuban government wherever Cubans were present, regardless of the nature of their activities or the varying levels of local capacity to manage the presence of Cubans.

6 A. Alamgir, Inappropriate behavior, in: *Labor in State Socialist Europe, 1945–1989: Contributions to a Global History of Work*, ed. M. Siefert, Budapest/New York 2020, p. 101.

7 Based on the fact that the overall estimated number of Cuban students and workers together in the GDR was 30,000 and that the overall estimated number of students were less than 3,000 in the same time period.

8 H. Bortlová-Vondráková and M. Szente-Varga, Labor migration programs within the socialist bloc: Cuban guest-workers in late socialist Czechoslovakia and Hungary, in: *Labor History* 62 (2021) 3, p. 5.

garia.⁹ This article does not zoom in on the transfer and networking experiences of East Central European actors but reconstructs Cuban experiences with labour migration programmes in the context of the CMEA.

The economic organization of the self-denominated “Socialist World System” aimed to align the levels of development between its European and Non-European members, in line with the Complex Programme from 1971.¹⁰ Cuba seized that opportunity in the midst of the delicate economic situation in the wake of the economic experiments of the 1960s. It was no coincidence that Cuba became a full member of the CMEA after the adoption of its Complex Programme and the dramatic failure of the sugar harvest mobilization campaign (*Gran Zafra*) in 1970. What Cuba achieved within that organization from 1972 until 1990 is paramount for the argument of this article. Cuba not only pursued an active role within the CMEA as a development organization for its non-European members, which was precisely the case of Cuba, but was very active in its engagement towards countries with a “socialist path of development” in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. All those countries of the Global South set on a non-capitalist way of development, such as e. g. Angola, Ethiopia, and Mozambique, should be helped “through economic, scientific and technical cooperation as well as trade, in advantageous terms for them, with a view to their future incorporation into the world socialist economy system”.¹¹ The potential socialist globalizing effect was a fundamental line of the Cuban approach to development aid in the context of the CMEA. “To train new socialist persons as a mean of building global socialism” was a main line of action.¹²

Moving from words to practice, Cuba became an example of the development ideas of its leader Fidel Castro for East-South relations. One chapter of the “Cuban globalism” was its “internationalism” as the civil and military assistance was denominated in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.¹³ Another specific characteristic of the Cuban commitment with the “convergence” process was that Cuba became – after the Soviet Union and followed by the GDR – the largest education centre of the socialist block for international students. Fidel Castro declared in 1989 that Cuba was the country of the world with the highest ratio of foreign students. On the *Isla de la Juventud* alone, there were 18,000 foreign students and 24,000 in the whole country.¹⁴ In official documents we can read that the

9 Representación gráfica de algunos indicadores del trabajo de la juventud [Graphical representation of some youth work indicators], Archivo Central de la Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (Central Archive of the UJC), Sección 9 V, Congreso de la UJC 1987, 57-3-1862/1: 9.0.8, Documentos entregados a los delegados [Documents provided to delegates].

10 CMEA, Komplexprogramm für die weitere Vertiefung und Vervollkommnung der Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung der sozialistischen ökonomischen Integration der Mitgliedländer des RGW, Moscow 1971.

11 R. Roa Kourí, *En el torrente* [In the torrent], Havana 2004, p. 295.

12 A. Alamgir and C. Schwenkel, *From Socialist Assistance to National Self-Interest: Vietnamese Labor Migration into CMEA countries*, in: J. Mark, A. M. Kalinovsky, and S. Marung (eds.), *Alternative Globalizations. Eastern Europe and the Postcolonial World*, Bloomington 2020, p. 101.

13 M. Erisman, *Cuba's International Relations: The Anatomy of a Nationalistic Foreign Policy*, New York 2019.

14 Discursos pronunciados por Fidel Castro Ruz por el XXX aniversario del triunfo de la revolución el 4 de enero de 1989 [Speeches delivered by Fidel Castro Ruz on the 30th anniversary of the triumph of the revolution on January 4, 1989], <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1989/esp/f040189e.html> (accessed 11 January 2024) y

purpose of the Communist Party of Cuba was “to cooperate and to give technical assistance following our limited resources to other underdeveloped peoples of the world”.¹⁵ The term “underdeveloped” also in referring to others became a criterion for providing aid, scholarships and technical assistance and it strengthens the argument of Cuba’s role in development. In practice that country operated as a development bridge between the European centre of the CMEA and its fringes in the Global South. Jorge Domínguez concluded that “within the context of Soviet hegemony, Cuban foreign policy is very much its own”.¹⁶ Michael Erisman agreed with this idea while pointing out that the aid from European CMEA countries provided to Cuba was nevertheless paramount to make possible the Cuban military and civil involvement in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.¹⁷ The Cuban labour programme with CMEA members became a visible part of the socialist cooperation schemes in the “mutual interest”. As part of the CMEA “development mission”, overseas labour programmes were seen “as means of ensuring the growth of socialism globally”, to populate new socialist countries with skilled workers “and thus usher in socialist modernity”.¹⁸ Therefore, the Cuban labour programme cannot be excluded from the boom of the Cuban participation in several multidirectional and transcontinental socialist mobilities aiming development alignment during the 1970s and the 1980s. It has been argued that overseas labour programmes with CMEA countries were, in contrast to the Western arrangements, originally not “envisioned or articulated as a strategy for economic growth in the receiving countries” but rather “emerged from a history of comprehensive development aid”.¹⁹ Alena Alamgir affirmed that “the workers and apprentice-workers programme was supposed to exemplify socialist internationalism in practice, as its goal was to help bring about a global communist society through the building of socialism in individual countries, for which industrial advancement was seen crucial”.²⁰ Those key characteristics of socialist labour programmes in the context of the CMEA convergence aspirations justified the way in which Cuban authorities conceived the sending of workers. The Cuban labour programme was less about what the European CMEA counterparts wanted but about what Cuba needed.

The interests of sending countries have so far received little attention. Christina Schwenkel used the wider catalogue of sources and interview partners to bring forward the standpoint of a sending country, in this case Vietnam. Recently, Marcia Schenck took a

por el 30 Aniversario de su entrada a La Habana, efectuado en la escuela Ciudad Libertad, el 8 de enero de 1989 [and on the 30th anniversary of his entry into Havana, held at the Ciudad Libertad school on January 8, 1989], <http://www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-en-el-acto-central-por-el-30-aniversario-de-su-entrada-la-habana> (accessed 11 January 2024); Speeches on the central celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the triumph of the Cuban Revolution, 4 January 1989 and 8 January 1989.

15 *Acerca del Primer Congreso del Partido Comunista de Cuba. 1976–1977* [About the First Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba, 1976–1977], Havana 1976, pp. 57–61.

16 J. Domínguez, *To Make the World Safe for Revolution. Cuba’s Foreign Policy*, Cambridge 1989, p. 4.

17 Erisman, *Cuba’s International Relations*.

18 Alamgir and Schwenkel, *From Socialist Assistance to National Self-Interest*, p. 101.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 104.

20 A. Alamgir, Race is elsewhere: state-socialist ideology and the racialization of Vietnamese workers in Czechoslovakia, *Race and Class* 54 (2013) 4, p. 69.

closer look at the case of Angola and Mozambique and their mobilities with the GDR.²¹ The access to material from the Archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba located at the Institute of Cuban History, the Central Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Central Archive of the Young Communist League allows us to present the Cuban standpoint. One cannot expect that each Cuban institution treasures its historical past or has the minimum conditions to do so. Mistakenly, we thought that the Party also had at its headquarters the documentation of its youth organization. The idea about a separate archive surged during a failed attempt to obtain files from the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. The Central Archive of the Young Communist League of Cuba turned out a jewel in the rough. While the archives kept by the Communist Party of Cuba at its headquarters were inaccessible, its youth organization granted us access. What did this really mean for this research? It meant that we had direct access to the party's strategy and all kinds of its documents anyway. But why the access to the archive of the Young Communist League gave such relevant sources about the labour programme implementation? Workers sent to the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria were young. The most recurrent age range mentioned in the selection-related documents is from 18 to 27 years. For the party, the Young Communist League was not only its natural source of new generations of cadres; but the way of influencing each and every one of the young Cubans. It explains why although the Communist Party of Cuba was the supreme decision-maker behind the conception, negotiation, and surveillance of the Cuban labour programme with CMEA countries, the political implementation in the receiving countries was delegated to the Young Communist League. Thus, its archives provided the documentary sources of the main political implementation institution abroad.

The authorities of Cuba were happy to send workers to the European CMEA member-states. Hana Bortlová-Vondráková and Mónika Szente-Varga affirmed that in mid-1977, Cuba addressed the CMEA members with a proposal of sending more than 110,000 Cuban citizens.²² They should be trained and employed in the industrial and tertiary sectors. Supporting this, a document from the secretariat of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany entitled "Statement of Reasons for the Decision on the Temporary Employment of Cuban Workers in Companies in the GDR" from 8 December 1977 affirmed that

[o]n the occasion of the discussions between the chairman of the Central Planning Commission of Cuba, Comrade [Humberto] Perez, and the chairman of the State Planning Commission of the GDR, Comrade [Gerhard] Schürer, in July 1977 and during discussions between the chairmen of the GDR – Cuba Economic Commission, Comrade Dr. [Gerhard] Weiss and Comrade [Carlos Rafael] Rodriguez, the Cuban side suggested sending Cuban workers to the GDR.

21 M. C. Schenck, *Remembering African Labor Migration to the Second World*, London 2022.

22 Bortlová-Vondráková and Szente-Varga, *Labor migration programs within the socialist bloc*, p. 300.

The Cuban comrades stated that due to the sharp fall in sugar prices, a number of planned investment projects could not be realized and the planned job expansion would not be achieved.

This creates a labour surplus of around 100,000 people in Cuba in 1977, which will increase to 150,000 in 1978. The sending of some of these workers to socialist countries should also be linked to the aim of giving practical professional experience to them and training them in the work process.²³

Several conclusions can be made from the analysis about the level at which the dialogues were held, as well as about the specific positions of the involved representatives. All of them were important members of the central committees of the Communist Party of Cuba and the Socialist Unity Party of Germany in addition to their administrative positions. The labour programme was provided with the normative, subjective, and political content that characterised the work of these organisations. The temporary and state-party-led labour migration was included from the beginning in the bilateral planning coordination. Even when the above-mentioned reason for the migration of Cuban workers – unrealised investments – was in itself an example of both problems of the Cuban planning and bilateral planning coordination. Planning was a centrepiece of the socialist economy and the planning coordination a core element of the socialist integration process among CMEA member states. The importance of coordinating the circulation of Cuban workers in both the Cuban and the East-German national plans illustrated the metaphor by the Cuban economist Julio Díaz Vázquez of the socialist integration as an international production cooperative.²⁴ Additionally, Gerhard Weiss and Carlos Rafael Rodríguez were not only the chairmen of the GDR-Cuba Economic Commission but also the main representatives of both countries for CMEA affairs, which placed the debates on labour mobility beyond the bilateral sphere.

Although Cuba aimed to engage with all European CMEA member countries, in the end, these efforts resulted in bilateral agreements with only four of them. The outcome has been one expression of the fact that during the 1970s and the 1980s the Cuban revolution was still in its beginning, while countries in Central Eastern Europe were rather in the period of late socialism lacking the enthusiasm Cubans eventually still had to pursue the development convergence in practice. A second reason for the failure of negotiations with other counterparts like the Soviet Union was the inability of some CMEA members to receive workforce in the industrial sectors prioritised by Cuba. This article will not delve into those cases.

Even though only four European socialist states participated in the programmes, the original concept of “workers to the CMEA” or “workers to the socialist countries” per-

23 Begründung des Beschlusses über die zeitweilige Beschäftigung kubanischer Werk­tätiger in Betrieben der DDR. Vorlage für das Sekretariat des ZK der SED / Werner Krolikowski, Berlin 8.12.1977, Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch), SAPMO DC 20-1/4/3956, fol. 1–25. In addition to the GDR, contacts with the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia were mentioned on this matter.

24 J. Díaz Vázquez, Cuba en la integración económica socialista [Cuba in socialista economic integration], Havana 1984, pp. 23–35.

sisted in Cuban documentation and organizational structures, giving the impression that the programmes involved all European CMEA countries until their conclusion in 1990. As an example, an independent Department for youth to work and to be trained in the CMEA countries' in charge of signing the bilateral agreements with the counterparts and selecting the contract holders was created at the headquarters of the Cuban Ministry of Labour and Social Security. Joaquín Benavides Rodríguez, the Minister of Labour and Social Security, wrote in his congratulatory letter for the new year to the Cuban workers in the GDR and Czechoslovakia in December 1980:

*Your work [...] constitutes a valuable experience that, further developed in the future, will allow the country to deepen collaboration within the framework of the CMEA, in addition to raising the qualification of our workforce in a comprehensive and effective manner.*²⁵

This message shows two different lines in which the idea of development encompasses the Cuban labour programme in the CMEA context. The first line is presented in a very subtle way. The labour programme was seen not as an objective in itself; but as a method to achieve a more important objective: to deepen long-term relations with the CMEA countries. The second idea was presented by an expected defined outcome but also with an interesting nuance. The Cuban authorities assumed that in the socialist context the labour programme would not only increase the qualification of its workforce but such a process would take place in a comprehensive and effective manner, that is the idea of a well-rounded education that will be explained later in this article.

The signing of bilateral agreements did not reduce the importance of the CMEA framework, at least not from the Cuban point of view, because the socialist integration has been seen in last instance as a productive integration and did not reduce the importance of the “national” decision making process. This is precisely why socialist countries referred to socialist “internationalism” that can be perhaps better understand as “internationalism”. Signing bilateral agreements cannot be presumed as direct undermining of the CMEA context because the CMEA was never designed as a supranational economic organization. Even in the cases of CMEA special multilateral programmes aiming Cuban development – like e. g. sugar, citrus, and nickel – only interested member-countries took part. The bilateralization of the Cuban labour programme was embedded in the general principles and values promulgated by the CMEA countries and, more importantly, in the Cuban development expectations of their putting into practice.

25 Carta de Héctor Martínez Brito. La Habana 11.12.1980 [Letter from Héctor Martínez Brito. Havana, December 11, 1980], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1980, 10-1-300/1: 4.0.3, Correspondencia [Correspondence].

2. A Development Programme?

Cuba received economic profit from the labour programme with CMEA countries. In 1979, the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers of Cuba decided on remittances to Cuba amounting to 60 per cent of everything earned above the agreed minimum wages of 900 crowns in Czechoslovakia and 350 marks in the GDR.²⁶ The money has been deducted from the salary in the official currency of the host countries and later converted to Cuban pesos. The amount was deposited in the workers' bank accounts to be used during vacations in Cuba or after their definitive return. The money was used by Cuba to facilitate payments to its counterparts. In 1982, the direct economic benefits helped to improve the balance of payments with the GDR by 30 million marks, and with Czechoslovakia by 37 million Czechoslovak crowns.²⁷ Workers primarily were those who sought economic advantages from their work in CMEA countries hence they found it difficult to give up a significant part of their salaries in the host country, because they had access to a wider and better variety of products lacked in Cuba. The commodification of remittances was already well explained by Alena Alamgir, even though she has analysed the Vietnamese case, which did not present the remittances regimen applied by the Cuban government.²⁸ The strategy of the Communist Party of Cuba relied on the workers' understanding of putting the importance of collective interest above individual interest. The country needed foreign currency to improve its balance of payments with its socialist counterparts. It was also in the national economic interest that part of the salaries was spent in Cuba to dynamize the internal market.

Economic considerations also focused on the question of work complementarity, shortages in the receiving countries and unemployment in Cuba. However, that labour complementarity was not the only reason to explain why thousands of workers were sent to the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. According to the consulted archive material for this contribution, the range of Cuban reasons for sending workers was more in the political and in the broad educational sense than on the economic level. After all, the Third Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba in February 1986 proposed to put an end to the labour programme because of its political and educational shortcomings, even though it was evaluated as economically successful.²⁹ As Jorge Domínguez stated:

26 Informe de los resultados del control y ayuda del Comité Nacional a los jóvenes trabajadores estudiantes en la RSCH y la RDA [Report on the results of the control and assistance from the National Committee to young worker-students in the RSCH and the GDR], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 7 Organización 1979, 7.6.5 Comité de Base UJC en el exterior RSCH [UJC Committee Abroad RSCH].

27 Carta de Secundino Guerra Hidalgo a Carlos Lage Dávila, La Habana 10.11.1982 [Letter from Secundino Guerra Hidalgo to Carlos Lage Dávila, Havana, November 10, 1982], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 1 Primer Secretario 1982, 11-1-331/4: 1.0.10, Documentos sobre esfera obrera [Documents on the labor sphere].

28 A. Alamgir, *The moped diaries: Remittances in the Czechoslovak-Vietnamese Labor Migration Scheme*, in: *Work out of Place*, ed. M. Zarkar, Berlin/Boston 2017, pp. 101–120.

29 Carta de Carlos Rafael Rodríguez a Ernesto Meléndez Bachs, La Habana 4.2.1987 [Letter from Carlos Rafael Rodríguez to Ernesto Meléndez Bachs, Havana, February 4, 1987], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1987, 14-2-436/5: 4.0.14, Correspondencia enviada y recibida del Consejo de Ministros [Correspondence sent and received from the Council of Ministers].

“when a choice must be made, Cuba consistently chooses politics over prosperity”.³⁰ Therefore, from the Cuban point of view the labour complementarity or more precisely economic interests, were on a secondary level of importance not only at the beginning of the programme but also later during its implementation. In this sense, an exclusive argument of the labour complementarity turns simplistic and misleading, at least to explain the whole extension of the Cuban government’s purpose with sending workers.

By reading meeting minutes and bilateral communications about the negotiation process, we realise that state representatives from both sides focused on details about the amounts of workers, industry sectors, workers’ life conditions, and legal issues but they always postponed the decisions about economic issues.³¹ This highlights the intentions to send Cuban workforce to CMEA countries, with the assurance that these countries would carry all the necessary expenses such as travel and accommodation costs, salaries, and all others. How can we explain this behaviour? Was this a sign of overall economic benefit for the European countries or a practice of mutual interest between Cuba and its CMEA counterparts? Sandra Gruner-Domić highlighted that GDR experts estimated that accommodation, attention, and training for non-European workers had cost the double than for contract workers from European countries.³² It means that the cost-benefit outcome of these agreements for the GDR was less advantageous than those previously existing with Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. The extra-European and “underdeveloped” condition of Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, and Mozambique played a crucial role in the results of these bilateral negotiations. At least in the case of Cuba, we do have indications of further interests than economic calculations. The developmental and educational dimension of the contract labour programme has recently been highlighted by Berthold Unfried.³³ The Cuban authorities expected direct and indirect transfers of that experience. More than professional training or technical instruction, the Communist Party of Cuba pursued a broad concept of education or well-rounded education: the adoption of manners, habits and ways of conduct of an integral socialist personality. The sending of workers to the CMEA countries thus also addressed certain problems in Cuban society. The campaign led by the Communist Party of Cuba against absenteeism and vagrancy reached its peak just before Cuba became a full member of the CMEA in 1972. The Law against Vagrancy was adopted in 1971. It established the obligation for all citizens to work and the presumption that all men between the ages of 17 and 60 and women between the ages of 17 and 55 were physically and mentally fit for work. The Cuban historian Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring affirmed that vagrancy was an “old moral

30 Domínguez, *To Make the World Safe for Revolution*, p. 7.

31 Begründung des Beschlusses über die zeitweilige Beschäftigung kubanischer Werkträger in Betrieben der DDR. Vorlage für das Sekretariat des ZK der SED / Werner Krolkowski, Berlin 8.12.1977, Bundesarchiv Berlin (BA), SAP-MO DC 20-1/4/3956: Fol. 1-25.

32 S. Gruner-Domić, *Beschäftigung statt Ausbildung. Ausländische Arbeiterinnen und Arbeiter in der DDR (1961–1989)*, in *50 Jahre Bundesrepublik – 50 Jahre Einwanderung*, ed. J. Motte, R. Ohliger and A. von Oswald, Frankfurt a. M./New York 1999, p. 218.

33 Unfried, *Intercontinental Labor Migration*, pp. 131–173.

disease that Cuba suffers”.³⁴ Through the eyes of the Communist Party, the “disease” was still in the bones of the society. It was reported that around 400,000 workers, 20 per cent of the Cuban workforce in 1970, have been absent from their workplace.³⁵ The Communist Party of Cuba was proclaiming the development of a caretaker conduct towards social property and a sense of collectivism in the Cuban society, but the reality was far away from the political speeches.

Modifying the attitude of Cubans towards work was seen as both a decisive step to generate the necessary material base to build socialism and a way of erasing the persistent capitalist alienation in the creation of socialist “new men”. In the perspective of Cuban leaders, absenteeism and vagrancy characterised those people who, while were being able to work, did not want to contribute to the collective goals. However, those were not the only problem. A part of the population, although wishing to do so, could not access the limited educational system or the labour market. Those in the group between the ages of 13 and 16, who neither studied or worked were the most worrying for the Party and its youth organization, presumably because of their strategic role in the future of the country. The same year Cuba became a full member of the CMEA, in a presentation during the Second Congress of the Young Communist League of Cuba it was acknowledged that around 200,000 young persons were in this situation. They described them as people with poor study habits and always rejecting all teaching activities, a low degree in discipline, and the adoption of attitudes of improper conduct, becoming involved – generally speaking – very early in matters of sexuality and parenthood, and lacking affection and consideration for others.³⁶

Could the existing Cuban infrastructure assimilate them in such short term? Fidel Castro, the first secretary of the party, declared during the event the following issue:

*if tomorrow a law is made that establishes the compulsory nature of education from 13 to 16 years of age as well, we would not have facilities where to send them, we would not have study instruments, we would not have teachers.*³⁷

Some solutions in the short term were programmes formalising education for specific population segments by organizing workshops or groups for crafts, agriculture and food production, as well as the creation of the Youth Labour Army in 1973, followed by the

34 E. Roig de Leuchsenring, La vagancia en nuestros días: sus raíces y algunos de sus efectos y manifestaciones, in: Carteles, 21 March 1943.

35 Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, ‘Capítulo X: Derecho al trabajo. Sección 4. Otras Características del Sistema Laboral’, <http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/cuba83sp/capitulo10.htm> (accessed 11.01.2024).

36 Ponencia sobre jóvenes trabajadores, La Habana 15.9.1971 [Presentation on young workers, Havana, September 15, 1971], Archivo del Instituto de Historia de Cuba, 2088/10.1/117/35. F.10-35. F.15/23-26, and Proyecto de ponencia sobre los jóvenes de 13 a 16 años que no estudian ni realizan ninguna actividad socialmente útil, La Habana 15.9.1971 [Draft presentation on young people aged 13 to 16 who neither study nor engage in any socially useful activity, Havana, September 15, 1971], Archivo del Instituto de Historia de Cuba, 2089/10.1/117/35. F.10-35. F.15/37-57.

37 Discurso pronunciado por Fidel Castro Ruz en la clausura del Segundo Congreso de la UJC, La Habana 4.4.1972 [Speech delivered by Fidel Castro Ruz at the closing of the Second Congress of the UJC, Havana, April 4, 1972], <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1972/esp/f040472e.html> (accessed 11.01.2024).

adjustment of compulsory military service in 1976. It seems no coincidence that, precisely from 1978 onwards, when all these young people were of legal age, the CMEA countries agreed to receive part of them and to train them within the work processes, in support of the major strategy of the Communist Party of Cuba to reverse the situation described above. The formation of human resources had been defined as a priority at the First Party Congress in 1976. The “constant raising of the level of general education and culture of the people is an indispensable condition for the successive improvement of the economy, the state and the Party apparatus”.³⁸

All of the above-mentioned issues were seemed to be very pragmatic ones that every nationalist regime – not necessarily socialist – could pursue, but also were deeply entangled with the development of a socialist consciousness. Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s thinking about this issue survived his own death in 1967 shaping many of the future party actions under the idea that “[c]ommunism is a phenomenon of conscience and that conscience must be developed in man, from which individual and collective education for communism is an inherent part of it”.³⁹ The Communist Party of Cuba hoped to obtain among others moral results by sending workers to CMEA countries. Leading functionaries were convinced that “for young people who had not yet been incorporated into work, their participation in the industrial sector of a country like the GDR, with a high technical level and high discipline and labour organisation, would be beneficial in itself”.⁴⁰ Cuba needed to prepare not only skilled or semi-skilled workers in developed socialist countries but also men with a high sense for the usefulness of their work and of their role in the construction of socialism. Alena Alamgir also concluded that the key ideological rationale for these programmes was ‘to produce workers who were both technically qualified and good socialist citizens’.⁴¹

The Cuban labour programme with CMEA countries turned out to be above all a history of personal development of its participants. The trainees had little or no study and work experience and preferably belonged to the areas with the greatest socio-economic backwardness of the country. The first recruitments took place mostly in the centre and eastern region of the country, most affected by the demobilisation after the sugar harvest and prioritized in the national investment plan. The selection was later extended to the entire Cuban territory. According to the bilateral agreements, workers had to be young,

38 Departamento de Orientación Revolucionaria del PCC, Tesis y Resoluciones del Primer Congreso del PCC, La Habana 1976 [Revolutionary Orientation Department of the PCC, Theses and Resolutions of the First Congress of the PCC, Havana, 1976].

39 ANRED, ‘La ‘otra carta’ de despedida del Che’, 28.7.2019 [The ‘other last letter’ from Che, July 28, 2019], <https://www.anred.org/2019/07/28/la-otra-carta-de-despedida-del-che/> (accessed 11.01.2024).

40 Carta de Carlos Rafael Rodríguez a Ernesto Meléndez Bachs, La Habana 4.2.1987 [Letter from Carlos Rafael Rodríguez to Ernesto Meléndez Bachs, Havana, February 4, 1987], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1987, 14-2-436/5: 4.0.14 Correspondencia enviada y recibida del Consejo de Ministros [Correspondence sent and received from the Council of Ministers].

41 Alamgir, *Race is elsewhere*, p. 80.

unmarried, and in good health.⁴² The receiving countries were not involved in the selection procedure and the practical application of the selection criteria was fundamentally a Cuban prerogative. Therefore, labour inexperience and a political reliability ended up as the most indispensable conditions. The plan, as formulated in 1981, was to achieve a total of 5,000 workers in the European socialist-states by the mid-1980s.⁴³ Actual numbers were much higher: by 1986, there were more than 11,000 workers in the GDR, 10,000 in Czechoslovakia, 3,000 in Hungary, and 3,000 in Bulgaria.⁴⁴ These mobilities are testimony of the work accomplished by the Cuban institutions. However, they were continuously rather critical of the initial and persistent difficulties of the selection. There were some inequalities within the work of the commissions. Before taking a decision, every case needed the approval from each participant in the local selection commissions. Not all the institutional representatives were equally fast to submit their evaluations about every candidate and not all commissions were likewise fast to process the cases or even faced the same amount of cases to decide. The preparation of individual files happened to be quite challenging. Rushed decision processes were another problem. Once accepted, individual files were supposed to be controlled by the provincial instance of the Party and collected by Cubatecnica, the agency in charge of the implementation of the sending process, in order to be handed over to the host country one month before the workers' arrival. However, this was not always the case. The selection started sometimes very close to the expected arrival of the workers in the destination country and, therefore, everything was a bit different. People who met all the requirements were not approved within the necessary time while others with deficiencies were accepted in order to complete the numbers because the counterparts in charge of the expenses and travel arrangements would not be happy if Cuba did not send the agreed numbers of workers.⁴⁵ Groups were often completed with personnel already accepted in different parts of the country, to integrate a different workers' group, to work in a different industrial sector,

42 Abkommen der DDR-Kuba über die zeitweilige Beschäftigung kubanischer Werktätiger. Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch), DC 20/5362.

43 F. Puente, Jóvenes trabajadores: Nueva modalidad de cooperación socialista [Young Workers: A New Modality of Socialist Cooperation], in: *Colaboración* 3/2 (April-June 1981), p. 40.

44 Representación gráfica de algunos indicadores del trabajo de la juventud [Graphic representation of some indicators of youth work], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 9 V Congreso de la UJC 1987, 57-3-1862/1: 9.0.8 Documentos entregados a los delegados [Documents delivered to the delegates].

45 The situation described occurred, for example, with the first groups of workers for Czechoslovakia and the GDR. Since March 1978, it was known that the Czechs and East Germans wanted to use the flights that, between July 16 and 21, would return empty from Cuba after transferring the delegations from both countries to the XI World Festival of Youth and Students in Havana. On 3 July 1978, a communication from the National Bureau of the Communist Young League stated that "the situation in Villa Clara and Santiago de Cuba is very worrying, (...) there are 100 and 142 files [of candidates pending of approval] to be delivered respectively". All the files were ready in less than two weeks. Informe sobre las últimas orientaciones recibidas con relación a la selección y envío de 1500 jóvenes a calificarse en la industria textil Checoslovaca y Carta de Eliécer Ramírez a Francisco García. La Habana, 3.7.1978 [Report on the latest guidelines received regarding the selection and dispatch of 1500 young individuals to undergo training in the Czechoslovakian textile industry and Letter from Eliécer Ramírez to Francisco García. Havana, July 3, 1978], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 14 Esfera Obrera 1978, 14.3.3 Planes de trabajo [Work plans].

and to be sent to a different country, thus neglecting the initial idea of coherence between selection, the national investments plan, the local needs, and the posterior labour market assimilation.

There were investigations into allegations of fraud with consequences for implicated commission staff and volunteer candidates to work in CMEA countries.⁴⁶ Some files were dishonestly approved by decision-makers, sometimes with bribes or personal relationships involved, while some people who wanted to be selected deliberately lied about their school level, age, or employment situation. In addition, medical check-ups were not always rigorous. Chronic diseases were sometimes not detected by doctors or hidden by candidates. There was definitely not the same seriousness in all cases since people with mental and physical disabilities that prevented them from fulfilling the employment contract were detected about to travel or sent back from CMEA countries immediately after their arrival.⁴⁷

All the problems of the selection process in Cuba had evident repercussions for the subsequent performance of the workers in the receiving countries. Many official documents refer to the participation of Cubans in excessive alcohol consumption, promiscuity, public fights, and the breach of disciplinary regulations.⁴⁸ Negative conduct was noticeably more associated with personal behaviour in leisure time than at the workplace. The cultural distances, different lifestyles, difficulties in learning the local language, dissatisfaction with weather conditions, and limitations to integration persisted as triggering factors. Each premature return was perceived as a political defeat, and when the causes were indiscipline or antisocial behaviour, then they were considered flagrant violations of the principles and values defended by the Cuban Revolution or behaviours incompatible with the construction of socialism.⁴⁹

Continuing with the idea of the worker's development, two of the most interesting attempts by the Cuban authorities to reduce the "deformations" in the behaviour of some workers occurred in 1982. The first one was the "Course for Political-ideological Growth" which was intended to occupy part of the workers leisure time when the main problems occurred and to increase their political-ideological education.⁵⁰ The second attempt was

46 Ibid.

47 Reunión de dirigentes de la UJC en el exterior. La Habana [Meeting of representatives of the UJC abroad. Havana]. Archivo Central de la UJC. Sección 7 Departamento de Organización 1983. 12-1-367/2: 7.5.1 Reunión de dirigentes de la UJC en el exterior [Meeting of representatives of the UJC abroad].

48 Archivo Central de la UJC, Primer Secretario 1980 10-9-299/1: 4.0.2 Correspondencia recibida del Comité Central del Partido [Correspondence received from the Central Committee of the Party]; Primer Secretario 1984 12-1-365/1: 4.0.1 Correspondencia enviada al CCPCC Abelardo Álvarez Gil [Correspondence sent to CCPCC Abelardo Álvarez Gil]; Primer Secretario 1985 12-1-365/4: 4.0.6 Intervenciones; Organización 1982 11-2-340/1: 7.0.18 Sección atención a organizaciones de base en el exterior [Section for attention to grassroots organizations abroad].

49 Reunión de dirigentes de la UJC en el exterior. La Habana [Meeting of representatives of the UJC abroad. Havana]. Archivo Central de la UJC. Sección 7 Departamento de Organización 1983. 12-1-367/2: 7.5.1 Reunión de dirigentes de la UJC en el exterior [Meeting of representatives of the UJC abroad].

50 Informe acerca de los principales problemas político ideológicos que se manifiestan en la juventud, La Habana 4.11.1981 [Report on the main political-ideological problems manifesting in the youth, Havana, November 4, 1981], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1981, 10-3-314/4: 4.0.9 Correspondencia enviada a José Ramón Machado Ventura [Correspondence sent to José Ramón Machado Ventura]; Carta de Luis Orlando

the creation of the Contingent of Socialist Cooperation “Abel Santamaría”. Faced with the need to find organizational forms that would allow strengthening the surveillance and raising the results that had been achieved; the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Cuban Party in its meeting on 5 November 1982 adopted a set of agreements, emphasizing the need to increase and improve the selection mechanisms and attention to the workers abroad; and explicitly assigned the Young Communist League the task of establishing and directing the Contingent of Socialist Cooperation, as an organizational element to stimulate “superior political work”.⁵¹ The existence of the Contingent has been already mentioned in the literature, e. g. Hana Bortlová-Vondráková and Mónika Szente-Varga referred to the sending of the “relevant contingents of socialist cooperation” to Czechoslovakia.⁵² However, new conclusions resulted from the access to the Cuban archives. The creation of the Contingent marked the point of maximum complexity of the Cuban self-governing structures for the surveillance of workers in the receiving countries. Cuban authorities accumulated five years of experience with the labour programme before reaching this point of organisation abroad. After 1982, all Cuban worker-trainees in CMEA countries belonged to the Contingent from the moment on their selection was confirmed. That was a voluntary process but there are no material showing that someone refused to belong to the Contingent or about the possible ways to deal with such a situation.

How can we understand this new form of organization in the field? The Contingent of Socialist Cooperation was as a political mass organization. Only a part of the workers were members of the Communist Party of Cuba or the Young Communist League but all of them were from the moment of recruitment on “socialist cooperators”. This changing of denomination from “workers” to “socialist cooperators” served for the Cuban authorities’ purpose of increasing the moral and political burden of the participants in the labour programme. The goal was to group them to fulfil the task to work and get a qualification as an expression of high patriotic or internationalist sentiments. The Contingent of Socialist Cooperation was a more sophisticated way to deal with the increasing problems which were occurring with the workers. Reports about anticipated returns recorded a sustained annual rate of about 20 per cent of the workers.⁵³ For the Cuban authorities, it was correct and convenient to apply severe measures to those who made serious mistakes.

Domínguez a José Ramón Machado Ventura, La Habana 4.11.1981 [Letter from Luis Orlando Domínguez to José Ramón Machado Ventura, Havana, November 4, 1981], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1981, 10-3-314/4: 4.0.9 Correspondencia enviada a José Ramón Machado Ventura [Correspondence sent to José Ramón Machado Ventura].

51 Informe sobre el Contingente de Cooperación Socialista, 4.8.1984 [Report on the Socialist Cooperation Contingent, August 4, 1984], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1984, 12-1-365/1: 4.0.1 Correspondencia enviada al CCPCC Abelardo Álvarez Gil [Correspondence sent to CCPCC Abelardo Álvarez Gil].

52 Bortlová-Vondráková and Szente-Varga, Labor migration programs within the socialist bloc, p. 308.

53 Carta de Carlos Lage a José Ramón Machado Ventura. La Habana 3.7.1985 [Letter from Carlos Lage to José Ramón Machado Ventura, Havana, July 3, 1985]. Archivo Central de la UJC. Sección Primer Secretario 1985. 12-1-365/1: 4.0.1 Correspondencia enviada al CCPCC Abelardo Álvarez Gil [Correspondence sent to CCPCC Abelardo Álvarez Gil].

Sending them back to Cuba was also considered as an “educational measure” not without acknowledging that disciplinary measures, although necessary, were still traumatic and painful. According to the Secretary General of Young Communist League:

*It is natural, common and expected that in every young Cuban, and especially in every young communist, the sense of duty, honesty, discipline and spirit of sacrifice prevails. We have been educated in such values and our parents fought against the mud that covered them. When someone does not act according to such concepts, it harms us all, it affects our prestige, it affects the prestige of the Revolution.*⁵⁴

The status of “outstanding socialist collaborator” (colaborador socialista destacado) was given to all those who returned to Cuba with their duties successfully accomplished. In contrast,

*the worker who does not obtain the maximum qualification that according to the specialty he[ishe] can acquire, regardless of whether in the practical aspect he[ishe] has obtained good results, cannot be considered as having fulfilled the mission assigned to him [her] by the Revolution.*⁵⁵

The Cuban authorities constantly sought to maintain the negotiated relation between production for the host country and training for the Cubans in CMEA countries under the socialist principle of “mutual interest”. Cuban representatives asked the companies for a predefined plan establishing which channels and in what timeframes the planned training would be delivered. The companies had to explain when they kept Cubans as an unskilled labour force for eight or more months. The Cuban authorities also demanded well-prepared teachers, textbooks and dictionaries. Of course, these requests did not have the same force and follow-up in each and every one of the workplaces. Yet, the Communist Party of Cuba expected workers to master the technique and achieve work productivity equal to that of their local colleagues.

There were different lines of the, so to speak, “formalized” educational sphere that took place in the labour programme. As part of the preparation in Cuba before travelling, workers received some information about the history and culture of the host country, the work and life conditions they would have, the characteristics of the production sector to which they were assigned, the regulations and rules of behaviour to follow. Once in the host country, they were offered language courses and professional training. All groups of fifty workers should be provided with one translator, who should stay with them till the language courses were completed. The language courses could last between two and six months depending on the specific activities to be carried out. During this time, the

54 Intervención de Carlos Lage Dávila en la clausura de la asamblea de balance de la UJC en la RDA [Speech by Carlos Lage Dávila at the closing of the assembly for the assessment of the UJC in the GDR], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1984, 12-1-365/4: 4.0.6 Intervenciones [Speeches].

55 Informe del trabajo de la UJC en el exterior. La Habana 8.1982 [Report on the work of the UJC abroad. Havana, August 1982], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 7 Organización 1982, 11-2-340/1: 7.0.18 Sección atención a organizaciones de base en el exterior [Section for attention to grassroots organizations abroad].

priority has been to generate communicative competencies concerning specific work activity, work safety, and labour law. The deepening of the language skills was one of the expected results of the day to day life of workers, and for their contact with their local counterparts. Full or partial training courses were provided at the workplace. The individual contracts stipulated the completion of training as a skilled or semi-skilled worker. There was as a second and already mentioned line of education, which is the well-rounded education of workers in CMEA countries. The well-rounded education went beyond the formalized education through preparation, language and professional courses. It is probably more efficient to read the terms in which that large sense of education was conceived by the Communist Party of Cuba:

[...] for us, the concept of education has a broad meaning, but at the same time, it is well defined [...] Education is not a passive fact, it is not receiving classes or storing knowledge. To educate is to form [the personality], make man capable of fully facing life, and be a builder and creator of the future. And educating young people about communism means fully educating them. The technique is necessary to build the material base on which the communist society will be based, but communism is much more than an economic fact. When we talk about educating young people, we talk about forming new men, and this is not just the work of a technical institution. We aspire to train men freed from the burdens of selfishness and ignorance, men capable of facing life with a revolutionary concept of the scientific, social and economic order. That education will develop the very essence of man, his gregarious spirit, his solidarity, so that he is capable of responding, as if he felt it in his person, any affront to any human being in the world.⁵⁶

The constant effort to educate the workers in the large sense and to apply “educational measures” to reduce behaviours not compatible with the construction of socialism indicates that the Cuban authorities conceived and further implemented the labour programme as an attempt to provide cultural, political, and ideological development to its participants. In line with this idea, Jorge Domínguez highlighted that “the revolutionary organizations and the activities they sponsor have been a far more effective tool for change in Cuba than schools”.⁵⁷ This is what the expected outcomes from the labour programme were about: change towards all-rounded educated individuals who all together could impulse socialist development. The progress of Cuban industrialization did not only depend on the speed to assimilate the most modern technologies and production techniques. The absence of a qualified labour force was a serious obstacle for any attempt to modernize the economy and the society. The efficiency of socialist production was closely dependent on the knowledge and experience that workers possessed in the

56 Intervención del Compañero Jesús Montané Oropesa ante el II Congreso de la UJC, Archivo Central de la UJC [Speech by Comrade Jesús Montané Oropesa at the II Congress of the UJC], Sección II Congreso de la UJC 1972, 56–1–1816/3: 1.0.8, Intervenciones [Speeches].

57 Domínguez, To Make the World Safe for Revolution, p. 486.

manufacture and the use of the available means of production. The individual was subject and object of the development process.

3. How to Evaluate the Outcome?

The outcome can be evaluated through a look at the worker's performance in the host countries in relation with the reduction of vagrancy and absenteeism, the formation of human resources and socialist consciousness. This gives us a better idea to which extend the Cuban aim to use the deployment abroad as means of cultivating particular work habits has been successful. It is documented that many workers systematically exceeded established production norms and received prizes or collective recognition.⁵⁸ The counterparts of the Communist Party of Cuba and the Young Communist League in CMEA countries had a positive opinion on the performance of the Cuban workers at the workplace. However, there were frictions regarding the professional training on the ground. They manifested themselves differently in each company.

Many workers were annoyed when they did not receive the expected training, when the quality has been often not high enough, or when the workers were trained in a job other than the one they had intended to undertake. Additionally, there was a lot of uncertainty and contradictory information about the job placement after their return and, by transitivity, about the extent to which the training in CMEA countries would later be valuable in Cuba. The workers did not understand difficulties during the negotiations of the job profiles, bad planning of the Cuban ministries, or lousy coordination of the courses in the workplaces. In the same way, workers had to be punctual and carry out their work; they demanded to receive the agreed training with the minimum necessary conditions. The opposite behaviour was also recorded. In many cases, Cuban workers were more interested in additional economic benefits from their direct participation in production, such as taking extra shifts, than spending their time studying. Nelson Machín Viera, former worker and group translator in Czechoslovakia, remembered the situation and pointed out that there were many problems with the levels of courses assimilation, primarily because of the lack of study experience among workers – who, in most cases, even struggled with their native language – or simply did not want to study or learn.⁵⁹ Authors such as Sandra Gruner-Domić argued that professional training on the ground was not a fundamental component of the socialist labour programmes.⁶⁰ Alena Alamgir wrote that, in the Cuban case, in Czechoslovakia “the training component may have sometimes fallen by the wayside”.⁶¹ Curiously, the interest that workers have shown in training opportunities is not the focus of any analysis yet. In that sense, we can wonder

58 Informe sobre el Contingente de Cooperación Socialista, 4.8.1984 [Report on the Socialist Cooperation Contingent, August 4, 1984], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1984, 12-1-365/1: 4.0.1 Correspondencia enviada al CCPCC Abelardo Álvarez Gil [Correspondence sent to CCPCC Abelardo Álvarez Gil].

59 Nelson Machín Viera (former group translator in Czechoslovakia), in discussion with the author, 26 January 2022.

60 Gruner-Domić, *Beschäftigung statt Ausbildung*, p. 218; Alamgir, *Inappropriate behavior*, p. 102.

61 *Ibid.*

to what extent many people were simply happy when they could avoid language courses or professional training. This could also be a factor that such activities lost practical importance, were less visible, or eventually stopped.

Many cases of indiscipline and absenteeism were recorded as character problems, but the general opinion in the host countries about the labour performance achieved by Cuban workers was positive. They were said to master the relevant skills and achieved work productivity similar to their native colleagues regardless the level of difficulty of the work tasks. Many were awarded for their results. A Cuban report from 1981 registered that absenteeism of Cuban workers was 7 per cent in the GDR and 2 per cent in Czechoslovakia, while compliance with the norm was 93 and 102 per cent respectively.⁶² The art of mastering a profession and the process to achieve it cannot be denied, nor its educational component.

Table 1. Reasons for the early termination of contracts in the GDR, 1980.⁶³

Reason	Total	Of which were	
		Group leaders	Translators
Lack of discipline	197	–	2
Sickness	158	–	–
Antisocial behaviours	143	–	–
Pregnancy	44	–	–
Not sending remittances	31	–	–
Homosexuality	16	–	–
Exile	12	–	2
Death	3	–	–
Desertion	2	–	–
Administrative incompetence	–	10	–
Other causes	–	2	3
Total	612	12	7

As an example, by 1984, the Young Communist League affirmed based on their internal statistics that 4,000 qualified young people returned annually, 70 per cent of them

62 Información sobre las incidencias políticas recibidas durante el mes de febrero de 1982 de las organizaciones de la UJC en el exterior, La Habana 6.3.1982 [Information on political incidents received during the month of February 1982 from the UJC organizations abroad, Havana, March 6, 1982], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 7 Organización 1982, 11-2-340/3: 7.0.18, Sección atención a organizaciones de base en el exterior [Section for attention to grassroots organizations abroad].

63 Informe acerca del plan de selección y envío de jóvenes trabajadores a la RDA, La Habana 17.7.1980 [Report on the plan for the selection and dispatch of young workers to the GDR, Havana, July 17, 1980], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 14 Esfera Obrera 1980, 14.3.2, Informes [Reports].

(2,800) would reach good results and the status of outstanding socialist cooperator, and among them, 50 per cent (1,400) with highly satisfactory results.⁶⁴ All those turned into good workers in CMEA countries had left Cuba with little or no study and working experience.

Constant analyses were carried out on the circulation of Cuban workers in each country, particularly quantifying the reasons for anticipated termination of contracts (see Table 1). Even some group leaders and translators were sent back to Cuba as “educational measures”. Lack of discipline and antisocial behaviour counted as main reasons for the early returns.

The circumstances were critical when the first cycle was completed. Entire groups of workers accomplished their contracts and had to return to Cuba in 1982, but the number of those who returned early without fulfilling their contracts was increasing alarmingly (see Table 2). In 1981, the number of early returnees was larger than the number of newcomers. Something was not working well. Cuban authorities were overwhelmed by this fast change of circumstances so they could not follow by the same speed. Anticipated returns remained in the 20 per cent range in subsequent years.

Table 2. Total number of new workers and early termination of contracts in Czechoslovakia and the GDR until 1981.⁶⁵

Year	New workers	Early termination of contracts
1978	2169	113
1979	3812	465
1980	5341	704
1981	914	1013
Total	12,236	2,295

The fact that the workers were mostly of a medium-low intellectual level – as a result of the selection process where work and study inexperience prevailed – caused problems for their insertion in the receiving countries and increased the visibility of the cultural clash between Cubans and locals. Anyway, the leading figure for CMEA affairs in Cuba, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, pointed out the implicit benefit for each individual of “their participation in the industrial work of a country like the GDR, of high technical level and of high discipline and labour organisation”.⁶⁶

64 Carta de Carlos Lage Dávila a José Ramón Machado Ventura, La Habana, 5.12.1984 [Letter from Carlos Lage Dávila to José Ramón Machado Ventura, Havana, December 5, 1984]. Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario, 12-1-364/5: 4.0.1, Correspondencia enviada a José Ramón Machado Ventura [Correspondence sent to José Ramón Machado Ventura].

65 Prepared by the author on the base of information from the materials of the Archivo Central de la UJC.

66 Carta de Carlos Rafael Rodríguez a Ernesto Meléndez Bachs, La Habana 4.2.1987 [Letter from Carlos Rafael Rodríguez to Ernesto Meléndez Bachs, Havana, February 4, 1987], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secre-

Although the economic level was of lesser importance, some results in this sphere help us also to evaluate the outcomes of the labour programme for the Cuban development. The main problem for the workers as well as for the Cuban national economy after the workers' return to Cuba was to find an adequate job placement for them. The commission of the State Committee of Labour and Social Security in charge of assisting the first group of workers returning in 1982 "had to stop the process for not responding to their concerns", among which "the most important problem is the job placement, which is not guaranteed and that is in contradiction with what was oriented to them at the time of their departure".⁶⁷ The national labour market did not expand as expected, thus it still had a limited absorption capacity and, in some sectors, simply no capacity at all to assimilate all returned groups according to their new specific skills. These obstacles threatened the aspirations for development on the island, including the consequent growth of the labour market, compounded by internal planning problems. The meeting minutes of the Young Communist League representatives abroad evaluated the situation in 1983:

*The job placement of those who complete their mission is a fundamental problem that must be solved. From the 1983 return plan, 1911 have arrived in the country, of which 1738, 90 per cent have presented themselves at the local Labour and Social Security Offices and 1278, 73.5 per cent have been employed. The lack of offers or their distance from workers' places of residence [...] are the main reasons of the 460 still unemployed. [...] 173 have not asked for their job placement even though a part of them, according to the State Committee of Labour and Social Security, has arrived this year and therefore may still be in time to do so.*⁶⁸

By analysing the results of a completed cycle of the labour programme, we can see how the initial idea of coherence between the selection, the national investment plan, the local development needs, and the subsequent assimilation capacity of the labour market did not work out. Hundreds of seemingly unimportant decisions and pragmatic solutions as well as unforeseen day-to-day events often modified the expected result of sending workers to CMEA countries. Lack of consideration of the distance between the residence and the workplace was one of the most frequent causes of job placement failure in Cuba. The verbatim record of the plenary session of the Fourth Congress of the Young Communist League presents a case of this nature in contrast with another in which

tario 1987, 14-2-436/5: 4.0.14, Correspondencia enviada y recibida del Consejo de Ministros [Correspondence sent and received from the Council of Ministers].

67 Información sobre las incidencias políticas recibidas durante el mes de febrero de 1982 de las organizaciones de la UJC en el exterior, La Habana 6.3.1982 [Information on political incidents received during the month of February 1982 from the UJC organizations abroad, Havana, March 6, 1982], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 7 Organización 1982, 11-2-340/3: 7.0.18, Sección atención a organizaciones de base en el exterior [Section for attention to grassroots organizations abroad].

68 Reunión de dirigentes de la UJC en el exterior, Informe (1983) [Meeting of UJC representatives abroad, Report (1983)], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 7 Organización 1983, 12-1-367/2: 7.5.1, Reunión de dirigentes de la UJC en el exterior [Meeting of UJC representatives abroad].

everything went well.⁶⁹ In the first one, more than 80 workers trained in the GDR and assigned to the Carlos Marx cement factory in Cienfuegos abandoned their work. They did not live in the province and the authorities were not able to guarantee them adequate transportation or accommodation. The criticism touched upon both the “defeatist” spirit of the workers and the inability of the political and administrative structures to solve the problem in time. In contrast, the second case referred to the glass container factory in Las Tunas where about 70 workers trained in Czechoslovakia were assigned and successfully involved in the production and the training of their colleagues.

The causes motivating the internal fluctuation of the returnees were more diverse.⁷⁰ Regardless of the degree of training received, most of the workers were placed in the lower minimum category (C) of work, pending evaluation. This occurred because there was no correlation between the training programmes of CMEA countries and the Cuban possibilities of employment. A group of people was qualified in specialities or gained skills for equipment, which did not exist in Cuba. This made job reorientation necessary, which was rejected by many cases. In some branches, more people were qualified than needed, so they were temporarily placed as assistants or redirected to another activity. Environmental hygienic conditions and work equipment were comparatively better in European CMEA countries. Skilled and semi-skilled workers returned with high expectations of all kinds, which were difficult to find in Cuba. The lack of kindergartens for all the children the women had after their return delayed the incorporation of many women into the economy. “Of those [returned workers who could not receive an adequate job placement] there were some who continued studying and became technicians”, pointed out Pedro Mesa, in charge of the labour programme at the State Committee of Labour and Social Security during the 1980s.⁷¹ “At that time there were no women working on milling machines and lathes in Cuba”, explained Josefina Noa, who worked in the GDR between 1978 and 1982 and later continued studying in a line very different from her work experience: she became journalist after her return.⁷²

One way to see the results in the long term is through the extent to which Cuba authorities took advantage of the labour migration. The complicated situation of the most backward areas of the country and the existence of large groups of young people without study and work experience was significantly reduced. In addition, important groups

69 Acta literal de la sesión plenaria del IV Congreso de la UJC. Archivo Central de la UJC [Minutes of the plenary session of the IV Congress of the UJC], Sección 2 IV Congreso de la UJC 1982, 56-5-1848/4: 2.0.9, Expediente de la sesión plenaria [File of the plenary session].

70 Resumen de los resultados del análisis efectuado en las textilerías de Ciudad de La Habana, Villa Clara y Santiago de Cuba, La Habana 20.7.1985 [Summary of the results of the analysis carried out in the textile factories of Havana City, Villa Clara, and Santiago de Cuba, Havana, July 20, 1985], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1985, 12-3-370/3: 4.0.1, Correspondencia enviada a José Ramón Machado Ventura [Correspondence sent to José Ramón Machado Ventura].

71 Pedro Mesa (chief of the Department for Young People to Work and be Trained in the Countries of the CMEA in the State Committee of Labour and Social Security), in discussion with the author, 30 October 2018.

72 J. Noa, *Arbeiten für den Sozialismus*, in: W.-D. Vogel and V. Wunderlich (eds.), *Abenteuer DDR: Kubanerinnen und Kubaner im deutschen Sozialismus*, Berlin 2011, p. 65.

joined incipient sectors of Cuba's industrial sector, which was advancing towards the diversification of its traditional lines of production through cooperation projects within the framework of the CMEA. The factory for electronic components in the province of Pinar del Rio or various textile plants throughout the entire country are probably the best examples. For the Cuban economist Julio Díaz Vázquez, everything indicated that in the period up to 1990, no sudden qualitative changes would occur in the productive structure of the Cuban economy. But from that moment on, conditions would be more favourable for the development and creation of other branches and sectors of the Cuban national economy – such as biotechnology.⁷³ This prediction could not be tested. As a result of the collapse of the socialist block, Cuba lost its partners for more than 80 per cent of its foreign trade. The development of new economic sectors stopped. Many work centres closed and the number of workplaces were drastically reduced. While the Cuban society as a whole suffered under the conditions of the “special period”, the situation among the former workers in CMEA countries remained often solid, especially if they have achieved positions as group leaders or translators. They had cultural and social capital to adapt more easily to the productive and organisational changes. “I learned [...] an exact work culture. [...] I have colleagues who [...] have directed industries here, that is, we learned, they and I”, stated Praxides Claudio García, who, as part of the Cubatecnica staff, continued to be involved in sending new groups of workers to CMEA countries after having been group leader in the GDR between 1978 and 1985.⁷⁴

Another way to evaluate outcomes of the Cuban labour migration within the CMEA is to consider the general results of the worker's reincorporation into their society of origin. The most critical case was, according to the Communist Party of Cuba, that of the members of the Contingents of Socialist Cooperation who requested to remain abroad.⁷⁵ Over the years, the requests increased and, although a small minority, this phenomenon presented “a specific ideological problem, since it is about young people who, having been trained as a valuable workforce, voluntarily resign to give their contribution to the construction of the socialism in our homeland”, deplored a study by the Youth Research Centre in Havana.⁷⁶ In October 1985, there has been around 260 people in this situation, most of them returnees from the GDR. A total of 76 per cent of this group had married, and 69 per cent had children in CMEA countries. The regulations stated that they had to return to Cuba and deal with official migration procedures for reunification with their families. This was not easy because, once in Cuba, such a request was sometimes associated with a feeling of betrayal of the homeland or attachment to the better

73 J. Díaz Vázquez, *Cuba: Integración económica socialista y especialización de la producción* [Cuba: socialist economic integration and production specialization], Havana 1986, p. 114.

74 Praxides Claudio García (former group leader in GDR), in discussion with the author, 11 March 2019.

75 Centro de Estudios sobre la Juventud. Estudio sobre la problemática de los jóvenes del Contingente de Cooperación Socialista que han solicitado radicarse en el extranjero. La Habana 10.1985 [Center for Youth Studies. Study on the issues of young people from the Socialist Cooperation Contingent who have applied to settle abroad. Havana, October 1985], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1985, 12-3-370/3: 4.0.1, Correspondencia enviada a José Ramón Machado Ventura [Correspondence to José Ramón Machado Ventura].

76 *Ibid.*

material conditions of life in European CMEA countries. A communication from the national migration office of the Ministry of Interior revealed that in 1987 ‘only very isolated cases were being solved [with a positive answer] because about 4,000 people wanted to remain in the socialist [European] countries’.⁷⁷ Positive end expedite responses were mainly reserved for cases of ‘political interest’, which are not explained in the archival material.⁷⁸

The results of the project carried out by the Youth Research Centre served to give birth to measures aiming to reverse the situation during the second half of the 1980s.⁷⁹ The document identified a combination of objective and subjective reasons for the workers’ request, but the proposed measures were not sufficient to counter the phenomenon. Faced with the impossibility of compensating the Cuban economic and housing shortages that drove people to go back to socialist European countries, the control and coercion mechanisms were strengthened. The time of their compulsory social service when they returned to Cuba was increased, obliging them to return permanently as part of the employment contract. The host countries were asked to prevent workers’ intentions to marry or reside permanently by all possible means. It is clear that on the Cuban side, there was political and social pressure against the emigration of workers to CMEA countries. The number of those who managed to do so at the end of their contracts, through different legal – or illegal – means, was relatively small.

All workers who returned to Cuba had access to salaries and to comparatively superior products imported from CMEA countries, which gave the former socialist collaborators a temporal social and economic advantage in practice. Even selling those products in Cuba at a lower price than their purchase cost in the socialist European countries allowed many, for example, to purchase or to improve houses in which large families used to live together. Such possibilities were symbols of temporary success and the satisfaction of the duty fulfilled in Cuban society. The evaluation of this experience by the already mentioned Carlos Rafael Rodríguez was as follows: “The work experience received has been, as we presumed, beneficial for all, although it has been assimilated to different degrees by the thousands of young workers [in the CMEA countries]”.⁸⁰ Many of those who fulfilled their work contracts received the influence of a culture of forethought and planning, as well as discipline and organisation. Some changed their attitude towards work, the care for social property, and respect for their colleagues.

77 Carta de Arzuaga a Roberto Robaina, La Habana 27.7.1987 [Letter from Arzuaga to Roberto Robaina, Havana, July 27, 1987], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer secretario 1987, 14-1-431/1: 4.0.9, Casos de atención a la población [Cases of attention to the population].

78 Ibid.

79 Plan de medidas con los jóvenes del Contingente de Cooperación Socialista y estudiantes que han solicitado radicarse en el extranjero, La Habana [Plan of measures with the young people from the Socialist Cooperation Contingent and students who have requested to settle abroad, Havana], Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 14 Esfera Obrera 1986, 13-3-410/5: 14.0.5, Contingente de Cooperación Socialista [Contingent of Socialist Cooperation].

80 Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, Letter to Günther Kleiber, Havana, 26.1.1987 Archivo Central de la UJC, Sección 4 Primer Secretario 1987, 14-2-436/5: 4.0.14, Correspondencia enviada y recibida del Consejo de Ministros.

4. Conclusions

This article has presented the Cuban labour programme with CMEA countries as a history of development in the Cuban view. The access to Cuban archive material allows us to see the labour programme from the perspective of the sending country and reminds us that Cuba was a non-European and “underdeveloped” member of the socialist economic organization. This quality as a non-European sending country and ‘underdeveloped’ member of the CMEA was a paramount characteristic shaping the Cuban expectations with the labour programme. Even though it only took place with four CMEA countries, the sending of workers was conceived as a practical implementation of the socialist aim for alignment of the level of development. The labour programme was embedded into distinctive features of the CMEA’s economic functioning such as joint planning attempts as part of the socialist integration and the collaboration in the “mutual interest”. This development logic occasioned Cuban largest participation in socialist mobilities within the CMEA between 1972 and 1990. The CMEA context of the labour programme was not in an achievement of a multilateral scheme or the full participation of the organization members but in the perception on the Cuban leadership about the programme potential to push for national interests within the development agenda of CMEA countries.

This contribution demonstrated that the Cuban authorities mobilized a population sector with a marginal participation in the project of building socialism in the nation. The purpose was to transform deeply this reality and to educate the people through their labour experience in CMEA countries not only as skilled or semi-skilled workers but as integral socialist citizens. To pull people out of their study and labour inexperience was an aspiration as noble as complicated to achieve in practice. The priorities set by the Communist Party of Cuba and the further institutional actions and measures taken during the implementation of the labour programme reveal that this was not only a history of development, but most of all an opportunity for the personal development of its participants. Cuban authorities saw this programme as a development programme. This development programme had a strong emphasis on disciplining young people from underprivileged regions for the needs of a national, state-driven project of industrialization in which the state had neither the incentives (money, consumer goods) nor the coercive power to bring all young people to work, and also not the means to provide higher levels of education and professional training to all. Therefore, this article does not evaluate the programme in terms of “development effects” and rather looks at how authorities and participants evaluated this differently.

Direct financial revenue for Cuba, although pursued by the authorities, was of secondary importance. Instead, the Communist Party of Cuba and its youth organization focused on the expected political and educational outcomes of the labour programme. The reduction of vagrancy and absenteeism, the formation of human resources and a socialist consciousness among workers could not be achieved in the desired extension. Nevertheless, the results in this respect were significant among most of the workers who fulfilled their contracts. Here we talk about around 80 per cent of them. Job placement-

related issues and further economic consequences of the workers' return to Cuba created organizational challenges that Cuban authorities were not prepared to face. Yet, the returnees played an important role at workplaces of different sectors prioritized within the Cuban investment plan. The workers' reincorporation into their society of origin put the authorities in front of questions such as how to manage the aspirations of permanent migration to other socialist countries or how to avoid the socio-economic differences generated between workers in the CMEA countries and workers in Cuba.

Thousands of people returned from CMEA countries as skilled or semi-skilled workers who were ready to continue studying and working, having gained the necessary practical experience to train others, endowed with a certain knowledge of a new language and culture, and personally marked by a transcontinental "people to people" contact. Accordingly, they had a broader and more internationalised life experience than the average person in Cuba, with their own opinions about building socialism and their individual lives. This reinforces the idea that the labour programme was one form of the Cuban inclusion in the CMEA development policy. Its importance was much more relevant than generally estimated in the historiography.