

### [A reform that illuminated the land](#)



*One of the Revolutionary government's first actions, May 17, 1959, was to proclaim the Agrarian Reform, giving the land to those who worked it.*

Before the bright triumph of the Revolution in January of 1959, Cuba had lived with much poverty. The people of the countryside faced exploitation, disease, hunger, and the ever-present threat of eviction from the land they worked.

Suffering and want, lost lives, injustice, the fierce rule of large landowners was sufficient cause to create the powerful determination of campesinos that was decisive in changing the country's course. They joined the war of liberation, protecting and feeding the Rebel Army, doing everything in their power to support the nascent Revolution, as they had done during the independence struggles of the previous century.

The new social order meant profound change. It was no accident that one of the Revolutionary government's first actions was to proclaim the Agrarian Reform, to eliminate large landholdings, signed May 17, 1959, at the Comandancia de La Plata, deep in the Sierra Maestra. Thousands of campesinos received titles to the land they worked. Photo: Archive

This first law led to greater transformations within the Revolution and, for some scholars, established its

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agrarian, anti-imperialist, democratic-popular character, since the awarding of land to those who worked it affected not only Cuban latifundistas, but foreign owners of huge estates, as well, especially from the United States."The Revolution, by proclaiming the Agrarian Reform on May 17, 1959, freed the farming and working masses from exploitation: 100,000 tenants, sharecroppers, and squatters became owners under that law..."

Comandante en Jefe Fidel Castro would say, in a speech during the commemoration of the law's anniversary in 1984. A decade earlier, on the same date, he had asserted: "We must not forget that the Agrarian Law was not only a law for campesinos. It was also a law for agricultural workers.

Because agricultural workers were exploited miserably on rice plantations, on cane plantations. They lived in the worst conditions of misery, of oppression, of abandonment: without schools, without homes, without medical assistance, without retirement, without security of any kind."Once the land was returned to its rightful owners, hope returned to the fields and to thousands of families.

Also born, in 1961, was the National Association of Small Farmers, an organization to defend the interests of campesinos, for which so many had given their lives. Today, other interventionist, extraterritorial, inapplicable laws, such as the Helms-Burton, threaten to deprive Cubans of what is rightfully ours.

Today, 60 years since May 17, 1959, campesinos continue to be a powerful force, based on their love for the land, guiding the nation's destiny.

### **Before 1959:**

- 85% of small framers paid rent and lived with the ever-present threat of eviction from the land they worked.
- 85% of rural homes lacked running water.
- 90% of rural homes lacked electricity.
- Less than 8% of the rural population had access to free medical care.
- 45% of children, six to 14 years of age, did not attend school. For every 100 students attending public schools, only six completed sixth grade.

### **After 1959**

- 150,000 families became land owners under the Agrarian Reform proclaimed by Fidel, May 17, 1959- As of 2018, 100% of Cubans has access to electricity in their homes.- 74.4% of the Cuban population has access to water from the public distribution system, according to the 2012 Population and Housing Census.-

Cuba currently has one doctor for every 122 inhabitants, and medical care is free, a right protected by the Constitution.- Education in Cuba is free and compulsory through the ninth grade.

SOURCE: Por qué la Revolución Cubana; 2012 Population and Housing Census; Anuario Estadístico de Cuba 2017; Mesa Redonda television program.

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