**Che Guevara May Day speech**

*In Havana, the May Day celebration begins the night before, and a speech at that time by Guevara soon became a tradition. The selections here are from his speech of April 30, 1963, at the Garcia Lorca Theatre. The meeting, honouring Cuba’s outstanding workers and technicians for the year 1962, was held under the joint auspices of the Cuban Confederation of Labour-Revolutionary (CTC~R) and the Ministry of Industry, which Guevara headed.*

Compañeros:

We meet once again, on the eve of the International Workers’ Festival, to honour those compañeros who have distinguished themselves by their efforts in the service of production for our country, in the service of the noble cause of the building of socialism, as vanguard workers in each of the different enterprises into which our Ministry is divided.

During the twelve months of the past year, we have had periodic talks with those compañeros who, month by month by their dedication to their work, excelled among all the workers in our enterprises.

We have repeated over and over that, in the case of vanguard workers, excessive modesty is not a good quality but a defect; that the vanguard worker must show by his example, must make it vivid and palpable, communicate it, publish it, make his enthusiasm contagious, and see that his individual effort is transformed into a great, united, collective effort of all the workers; that the forces of the vanguard factories are transformed also into the great collective force of all the factories of the country, of all the centres of production; that they may simultaneously deepen the efficiency of the work and consciousness of our people, in order to obtain both the material abundance needed for the construction of socialism and the indestructible strength of consciousness of its sons, also needed for its defence.

During an entire year these two tasks have been completely fulfilled. Not without defects, not without more or less serious bungling, not without mistakes, quarrels, backward steps in order to get back on the road. But with unquenchable enthusiasm and complete dedication to our task, we have during the year of 1962 solidly constructed the basis of our society. We contributed, too, to the development of the revolutionary consciousness of the entire world when, confronted with the atomic menace of the Yankee invader, our entire people rose last October and gave an answer which without doubt will pass into history.

[](http://www.che-lives.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/rev-speech.jpg)

It was an example of how a people in revolution can confront great danger, even the menace of atomic destruction — a threat unknown to other societies in world history, and how with revolutionary consciousness and determination to win, and the militant solidarity of all the countries of the socialist camp and of all the world’s free men, a small people, living at the gates of the most aggressive and powerful imperialist power on earth, can triumph, can maintain its sovereignty, and, most important, continue building its own society.

The central task assigned to us, compañeros, in what might be called the trenches of production, is that of constantly continuing to construct, no matter what dangers threaten or what difficulties have to be overcome. And this task we are carrying out.

Each year that passes we do less badly at least; each year we learn from our own errors and the experience of other peoples. We are forging the basis of what will be in the future a powerful, autonomous, self-supporting industry in this country, which will have to rely on its great agricultural riches based on the fertile soil, favourable climate, and relatively low population density. . . .

You all know the immense number of illiterates we had in Cuba. We are all witnesses, and in some form participants in that battle, as heroic as any other battle, which we fought against the lack of culture, in this case illiteracy.

But illiteracy is only the extreme expression of a people’s lack of culture. Whoever learns just to read and write has taken only the first step toward culture.

Modern technique is advancing by giant steps. Very soon to be a qualified technician in this country will require a speaking knowledge of more than one language; and to read technical books will require knowledge of more than one language, to learn how to read the technical specifications and directions in whatever language, since the capitalists have produced a great deal in technology — and very good stuff — and we must know how to take advantage of all this knowledge.

Raising qualifications then is a cardinal task for the government and all the people and must not be neglected. Men and women, even when tired after work, must make the indispensable effort to study, even though for only an hour or half-hour a day, and try in this way to keep increasing their knowledge.

It is not important that in some few weeks or months the distance covered seems small. This is a task of years, and a task which must never end; a task also that is very difficult for a beginner, for a worker of a certain age who can barely read and write. But to the degree new knowledge is acquired, culture will cease to be a revolutionary duty, something more or less painful that must be done to fulfil a revolutionary obligation, and will become a need. And then it will cease to be an effort to continue the task of learning.

In this work tremendous efforts and a prodigious amount of society’s goods have been consumed and will continue to be consumed. We believe culture and public health are services on which we can never spend enough for our people; and the more we can give, the better it will be for all. And so we will continue to give as much as possible. But remember, the professors who teach the worker-students at the various levels of study are being kept out of production and therefore constitute a state expense which should be repaid to society by redoubled effort.

We must take up another red-hot problem, the new salary scale and the work norms, two closely related points we have been discussing for over a year.

I remember that on the eve of last May Day, in this same theatre, I asked pardon for not having finished this task. Today, in a certain sense, I should again ask pardon; but the task of organising the salary scales and work norms is very far advanced. And next month, by the middle of the month, pilot tests will begin in various industries, not only in our Ministry, but in all branches of the economy.

There we will be able to complete the methods for giving a single, salary qualification for the whole country, and a more equitable salary recompense. But there will have to be much firmness exercised in something that is still confused. The new salary scale, with the corresponding applied norms, does not necessarily signify a salary increase, far from it.

We have explained that in the first branch where this was set up, mining — and only in some of the mines — on account of the relatively low pay, the work norms and new salary scale meant substantial increases for the compañeros there. But it will not be equally so in all branches.

There are some groups of workers who at present are being paid in accordance with the averages considered adequate now, and some others who receive more than the average.

We have also made clear that all those workers whose average salary is larger than the new salary decreed will continue to receive their full salary, but divided into two parts: one corresponding to his actual work plus a legal extra so as not to upset the budgets of such compañeros, who won this higher salary over the years and under different circumstances, during the development of the capitalist process with all its consequently anarchic relations of production.

However, all new entrants in production will get the new salary scale, and one of the main points for measuring a rise in the scale will be the worker’s qualifications. This means that all workers who are satisfactorily fulfilling the standards of quality and quantity over a period of time, but who cannot ascend automatically in the salary scale since they are not part of a new group with a different scale, will have the opportunity to raise their qualifications and enter a higher income group, raising their salaries in this way.

So, individual qualifications will always be taken into account in considering each individual’s salary.

All this will be explained by the Minister of Labour; there will be preliminary discussions and a whole process of clarification, since this is a very complicated task in which the whole economy of the country is bound up.

In some cases, it will mean an increase in order to correct very low salaries; in others, salaries will remain the same, according to standards adopted from the new studies; in still others, they will remain the same — but these compañeros will have a divided salary, although the basic amount will not be touched.

Simply in order that it will be clearly established that one part of the salary belongs to him for, let us say, historic reasons, but that it is his individual salary. When this worker leaves his position, the salary for that job reverts to the norm, the fixed basic salary, and not the actual salary this hypothetical worker had been receiving. . . .

To finish this speech — a little long, a little tedious — I want to remind you, compañeros, of the responsibility that we have, all, without exception.

Today we are here to salute our best workers, the vanguard workers. And we are saluting also delegations of workers who have come to visit us from all over the world. . . .

We are a showcase, a mirror into which all the peoples of America can look, and we must work to make our abilities greater every day, and our disabilities fewer.

We must not return to the practice of hiding our defects so they may not be seen. That would be neither honest nor revolutionary. They will learn also from our mistakes, from our errors, the compañeros from America and the other countries of Asia and Africa who are fighting today for their independence. We must not cease to show a single one of our errors, not a single one of the vices of the past that we have not yet been able to resolve, nor a single one of the errors we have made in the socialist present.

We must be open, for this is our duty, because our duty reaches immense heights at this moment. And each of us is responsible to the peoples of the world for what the Cuban Revolution does and will do.

Our path is not simple; it is full of danger and difficulties. Imperialism is lying in wait at every bend of the road, hoping for a moment of weakness in order to launch itself against us; the reactionaries of all America are waiting to publish with joy even our own official acknowledgements of our errors.

Fundamentally they are trying to show America and the whole world that if a small country such as ours, without industries, without technological development, tries to make a revolution, it is bound to fail. And they use information and tricks, and also saboteurs and divisionists, to hold back our development.

We cannot allow ourselves one moment of weakness. Not now, when we are directly under the visual inspection of our guests, nor at any time; for in each minute of our country’s life we are under the eager inspection of all the peoples of America, who see in us a new hope of salvation, a new hope of redeeming themselves from their chains.

Let us show them the realities of the road we have taken, compañeros! Let us show them that not only are we capable of the dangerous task of confronting, almost unarmed at one time, the armed force of the oligarchy; of developing our popular armies by capturing arms from the enemy, of confronting them on the field of battle, and of catalysing the consciousness of the entire people of Cuba so as to convert them into a great vanguard army to destroy the dictatorship! Let us show that we are not only capable of preparing our whole people to stand as one, to launch our war cry, our defiant shout, which we all know; let us show also, compañeros, that we are capable of triumphing in this long, tiring, terrible struggle, in which we are being obstructed in the building of socialism by an imperialist blockade.

In the face of all the dangers, the threats and aggressions, the blockades, the sabotage, all the divisionists, all those powers who try to restrain us, we must show once more our people’s capacity to make their own history.

We must all be united, compañeros, firm in our faith, firmer than ever today, though perhaps not so firm as we shall be tomorrow, to go forward always with our eyes on the future, with our feet on the ground, building each step, and making sure of each step we take, so that we will never give up one inch of what we have won, of what we have built, of what is ours: socialism!

Our Country or Death! We Shall Win!