

Castroism at forty: the dead-end of petty-bourgeois nationalism

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With the beginning of the new year, Fidel Castro marked the fortieth anniversary of his coming to power. He has outlasted eight US presidents. Each maintained a policy of strangling his regime, either by military force, CIA-backed subversion, economic pressure or the assassination of the Cuban president himself.

Who in the US foreign policy establishment would have predicted such longevity for Castro's rule? Having greeted the collapse of the Batista dictatorship with some ambivalence, Washington lost no time in letting the guerrilla leaders know that not even the most timid national-reformist measures would be allowed 90 miles from US shores.

Limited land reform measures implemented in the first year of the regime provoked US threats and demands for immediate and full cash repayment, an impossibility for the Cuban government. Washington's policy was to squeeze the Cuban economy until Castro either changed course or was brought down. Faced with the aroused social expectations of the Cuban masses, Castro was compelled to defy US dictates, embarking on a course that culminated in the sweeping nationalization of both foreign and national capital, and a turn to the Soviet bloc for aid.

The US response was swift and unequivocal. Preparations were undertaken for a CIA-backed invasion, modeled on a similar enterprise that brought about the swift downfall of Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. Simultaneous plots were hatched for the assassination of Castro.

The April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion proved a humiliating fiasco for US imperialism. The assassination attempts, not a few of them worked out in collaboration with Mafia gangsters, were equally unsuccessful.

Following the negotiated end to the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, the US formally promised Moscow that it would abandon plans to invade the island. But assassination plots--involving everything from exploding sea shells to contaminated diving suits and poison pens--continued under the CIA's Operation Mongoose, as did acts of economic sabotage, including the spread of viral diseases among Cuban livestock.

Despite the CIA's efforts, Castro outlasted Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, Duvalier of Haiti and all of the military dictatorships that took power with US backing in the 1960s and 1970s. Only the dynastic Somoza dictatorship lasted longer--42 years.

If Washington could not have predicted the Cuban regime's capacity to endure, it is equally the case that Castroism's most fervent supporters could not have foreseen its fate. Some of the most sycophantic worshipers of Fidel have hailed the fortieth anniversary as another indication of the great leader's genius and his supposedly unique ability to express the needs and aspirations of the Cuban people.

Only a cynic, someone indifferent to human suffering and sacrifice, could deny the heroism of the Cuban people through four decades of US aggression. But there is a definite social type that has been attracted to Cuba's cause, less out of sympathy for the Cuban workers and peasants than fascination with Castro as a "great man."

Not a few middle class intellectuals find comfort in Fidel's paternalistic role, guiding and controlling the masses, rewarding and punishing, carrying out his well-known personal interventions to "set right" this or that manifestation of the immense and intolerable deficiencies in Cuban society. Typical of this school is an essay published recently in an Argentine middle class radical newspaper, describing the Castro regime as "a brilliant and even glorious effort to maintain Latin American independence and dignity just 90 miles from the empire."

This conception of Cuba as an island of independence in a sea of Latin American integration into a world market dominated by US-based banks and multinationals is all that is left to this sociopolitical layer. In an earlier period, in the decade that followed Castro's coming to power, expectations regarding Castroism were far grander, and such political illusions exacted a terrible cost.

Then, petty-bourgeois nationalists throughout the continent hailed the Cuban events as the opening of a new revolutionary road in which small bands of armed men waging guerrilla warfare would suffice to carry out a social revolution. No longer was the active, much less conscious, intervention of the working class a necessary precondition for the defeat of imperialism and overthrow of capitalism. Even the peasantry, proclaimed by Castroites as the most revolutionary of the oppressed, was relegated to the role of a more or less passive bystander to the heroic acts of the guerrillas.

Even a section of world Trotskyism--a movement that had been forged in struggle against Stalinism's attempt to subordinate the working class to the Moscow bureaucracy's alliances with various sections of the bourgeoisie, including the nationalists in the colonial countries--found in Castroism the pretext for renouncing the struggle to build a proletarian revolutionary party.

The results were disastrous. From Che Guevara's ill-fated adventure in Bolivia to the turn by former Trotskyists in Argentina and Uruguay to urban guerrillaism, including kidnappings and bank robberies, the Cuban road proved a dead-end. It served only to separate a generation of revolutionary-minded youth from the working class, politically disorient the masses of workers, and weaken their ability to block the military from installing dictatorships and carrying out savage repression.

Most critically, the revolutionary cadres assembled by the Fourth International were liquidated precisely in a period when the Latin American workers came forward in massive struggles, from Argentina's Cordobazo of 1969 to the repeated attempts of the Chilean workers to break out of the straitjacket of popular frontism under Salvador Allende.

Castro, both in his capacity as a client of the Soviet bloc and in his attempt to secure stability for his own regime, was all the while seeking to forge links with the same Latin American bourgeoisie that those inspired by his example were attempting to overthrow. In Peru, Ecuador and elsewhere this reached the point of claiming that even the US-trained military could become the vehicle of social progress. In Mexico, the corrupt apparatus of the ruling PRI could be forgiven for its massacre of

students in 1968 or its repression of those who sought to emulate Castro within its own borders, so long as the Mexican regime maintained diplomatic and commercial ties.

The defeats of the working class prepared through the turn to guerrillism, combined with Castroism's Realpolitik in Latin America, served to hold back the social revolution on the continent and ensure the Cuban revolution's protracted isolation.

In terms of its internal policy, the Castro regime by 1970 had given up its utopian claims of carrying out an independent socialist development, in the wake of the economic dislocation resulting from the failed mobilization for a 10 million ton sugar harvest. It subordinated Cuba's economy to that of the Soviet bloc, in many ways--albeit on more favorable terms--recreating the same economic relations that had existed with US imperialism before 1959. Cuba's role was that of an exporter of sugar and a few other raw materials in exchange for technology and manufactured products from the USSR and Eastern Europe.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost \$3 billion to \$4 billion dollars a year in Soviet aid, together with the market for more than 80 percent of its exports. The country entered what the Castro regime terms a "special period." It has been characterized by an ever-wider opening to foreign capitalist investment, combined with increasingly tight rationing of basic necessities for the masses of Cuban working people.

The media has carried numerous dispatches from Havana describing the suffering of those in Cuba who do not have access to dollars, either sent from relatives abroad or earned on the fringes of the island's burgeoning tourist economy and its illicit offspring, prostitution and crime. Widening social inequality, between those who have access to dollars and those who don't, has been amply described elsewhere.

There is something deeply hypocritical about most of these reports. The authors and their publications never bother to point out that the erosion of social conditions in Cuba means that the island nation is becoming more like the rest of Latin America, with all the poverty, inequality and suffering that capitalism has bred on the continent for centuries. No one bothers to compare the conditions of the Cuban workers with that of their counterparts in the Dominican Republic, Brazil or Mexico. Poverty and oppression in these countries is merely an accepted fact of life.

Castro's 40-year reign cannot be explained merely as a matter of political repression, though indeed his regime has dealt mercilessly with all forms of political opposition, particularly with signs of revolutionary opposition in the working class. Nor can it be attributed solely to Castro's ability--surpassing similar attempts by other bourgeois nationalist leaderships of his era--to exploit the Cold War conflict between US imperialism and the Soviet bureaucracy.

While Castro's nationalist regime did not and could not achieve socialism, it did bring about tangible social benefits for the Cuban working people and alleviated the grotesque social inequality and national oppression that characterized Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century.

Castro, moreover, has been blessed by the policies of his enemies. Few in Cuba could look forward hopefully to the triumph of either Washington's policy of economic suffocation or the return of the representatives of the exiled Cuban bourgeoisie, in the form of such organizations as the Cuban National Foundation and its terrorist agencies. The Cuban business mafia waiting to return from Miami and New Jersey has given every indication that it would inaugurate its rule with a bloodbath before embarking on an attempt to restore the status quo ante of oppression, corruption, racism and subservience to Washington.

Nonetheless, those who point to the countless unrealized predictions of Castro's demise over the last four decades to minimize the regime's current crisis are whistling in the dark. Castro's ritualistic repetition of slogans such as "socialism or death" in his fortieth anniversary speeches

seemed increasingly incongruous, given the fact that foreign capital is playing an ever-larger role in Cuba's economy, and tourism, considered the scourge of pre-revolutionary Cuba, is emerging as the key sector.

The Cuban government boasts that foreign corporations enjoy greater security and greater freedom of operation in Cuba--not to mention lower wages--than anywhere else in Latin America. Yet the regime engages in periodic crackdowns on the inevitable spawning of capitalist economic activity within the Cuban population itself, from the opening of living room restaurants to the renting of rooms to frugal tourists.

Significantly, one of Castro's repetitive and rambling speeches during a week of anniversary ceremonies was delivered to Cuba's Revolutionary National Police. In the course of the speech he paid tribute to specialized police units formed in Old Havana for the specific purpose of protecting tourists from street crime.

"We are defending the prestige of our country in the struggle against crime," he said. "The increase in crime discourages tourism." In the speech Castro acknowledged both the increase in prostitution and the increase of robbery in the capital. He said that much of these activities were attributable to people who had come to Havana from the provinces.

For the first time since the 1959 revolution, the city has seen the erection of unauthorized shanty-style dwellings by impoverished workers and peasants who have left their homes in the interior to come to Havana in search of work. This trend, commonplace throughout Latin America, has definite political significance in Cuba. One of the stated aims of Castro and his regime was to reverse the long-standing inequality between Havana and the provinces, the product of Cuba's extractive economy in which money and resources were funneled from the countryside into the capital.

Other themes sounded in Castro's speeches made it clear that the 72-year-old comandante hopes to continue the balancing act that he performed for so long between the major powers. Now, however, his hopes are focused not on the Cold War, but on the increasing economic rivalry between US capitalism and its competitors in Europe and Japan.

Thus, in his principal speech delivered in Santiago de Cuba, while railing against capitalist globalization and castigating the US and its multinationals for imposing "dehumanizing" neo-liberal policies throughout the globe, he praised the European powers, declaring the newly minted euro currency a "firm alternative" to the American dollar.

The European bourgeoisie was credited by Castro with providing the world with "a good example of what can be accomplished through the exercise of rationality and use of intelligence." The advent of the euro, he indicated, was the result of the European powers learning the lessons of past wars and deciding that they could no longer survive as isolated national economies.

Such rhetoric is a none-too-subtle expression of the increasingly powerful role that European capital is playing in the Cuban economy. Spanish corporations dominate in the all-important tourism industry, though Dutch capital has just completed construction of a major new luxury hotel in downtown Havana.

Meanwhile, the Castro regime continues to press for the lifting of the US economic embargo on the country, blaming it for much of the island's ills. Earlier this month, the official *Trabajadores* newspaper said that the embargo had cost the country \$800 million in 1998 and more than \$60 billion over the past 40 years.

While undoubtedly US economic pressure has done enormous damage to Cuba, the Castro regime in its public pronouncements never indicates what it expects a normalization of economic relations would mean. Would it not present a far more threatening challenge than the embargo itself, posing the restoration of the US economic hegemony that was interrupted 40 years ago?

That is clearly the view within the boardrooms of the most powerful US banks and multinationals. Business and manufacturers' groups have been

lobbying for the past several years for a lifting of the embargo, while a number of major corporations have opened exploratory talks with the Cuban regime and sent representatives to scout the island for potential investments.

Their concern is that the US Cold War-era policy toward Cuba--which remains in place because Washington wants to make an example of Castro and because the right-wing Cuban-American lobby exerts a disproportionate influence on American policymakers--is ceding what is potentially one of the region's most lucrative markets to European capital.

The Clinton administration's easing of restrictions on the transfer of dollars to Cuba, announced earlier this month, has the stated aim of increasing capitalist accumulation within the country as a means of cultivating a domestic political opposition. As one administration document circulated earlier this month put it, the policy initiative allowing any US resident to send up to \$1,200 annually to Cuba and permitting US organizations to provide resources to Cuban groups, is designed "to support the development of peaceful independent activity and civil society."

Conditions for the masses throughout Latin America continue to deteriorate, with mounting indications that, after nearly two decades of "structural adjustment," the entire region is on the brink of a new financial meltdown. Capitalism's crisis must give rise to another wave of revolutionary struggles on the continent. The success of these struggles depends on the ability of a new generation to absorb the bitter lessons of the 40-year experience with Castroism and the fate of the scores of guerrillaist movements that it spawned, and building a new revolutionary movement of the working class founded on the program of socialist internationalism.



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