

Cuba marks 50th anniversary of revolution in shadow of world crisis

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Cuba's leadership marked the 50th anniversary of the revolution that overthrew the corrupt US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista and brought Fidel Castro to power with relatively small and subdued ceremonies.

An ailing Fidel, now 82 and having last year transferred power to his 77-year-old brother Raul, issued a 15-word statement congratulating Cuba's "heroic people."

For his part, Raul delivered a brief speech in the eastern city of Santiago, the birthplace of the revolution, to an audience of some 1,000 state officials and invited guests. The Cuban people were instructed to stay away.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and his Bolivian counterpart, Evo Morales, apparently in response to the Cuban leadership's decision to keep the celebration of the revolution's golden anniversary restrained, cancelled plans to visit the island.

Much of Raul Castro's speech was dedicated to the memory of those who died in the revolution and a depiction of the 1959 revolution as the realization of the ideals of Cuban nationalist leader Jose Marti, which had been frustrated by six decades of US semi-colonial domination that followed the Spanish-American War of 1898.

He reviewed the record of the "diseased and vindictive hatred of the powerful neighbor" in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution, from the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961, to the countless attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro and other Cuban leaders, to CIA-backed terrorism and the five-decade US economic blockade.

The revolution, he insisted, remains "stronger than ever." He continued: "Does it mean there is less danger? No, it doesn't. Let's not entertain any illusions. As we commemorate this half century of victories, it is time to reflect on the future, on the next 50 years which will also be ones of permanent struggle.

"Seeing the current upheavals in the contemporary world, we cannot think that the coming years will be easier. I say this not to frighten anyone, but because it is simple reality."

He went on to quote from a speech given by Fidel in November 2005, warning, "This country could destroy itself, this Revolution could destroy itself, but they [the enemy] cannot destroy it. We could destroy it ourselves, and it would only be our fault."

The somber tone of the address was no doubt conditioned by the present economic impasse confronting the Cuban regime and its mounting concern that a further deterioration of social conditions and widening of social inequality could lead to popular unrest.

Last month, the government described Cuba's ballooning trade deficit as "a strategic issue for the country's economic survival." The deficit climbed by close to 70 percent in 2008, reaching an estimated \$5 billion. The economy has been caught in a squeeze between rising fuel and food imports and falling revenues from nickel, Cuba's main export. Nickel prices have plummeted to one fifth of what they were in 2007.

Meanwhile, the global financial crisis has made it increasingly difficult for Havana to obtain fresh credit to continue purchasing imports, which include 60 percent of Cuba's food, the prices of which are soaring.

The crisis has been exacerbated by three hurricanes that struck Cuba last fall, destroying 500,000 homes and inflicting an estimated \$10 billion in damage.

Strapped for cash, the Cuban state finds itself compelled to renegotiate its debt and delay payments to both state and private creditors.

As a result, the government is increasingly raising the prospect of austerity. In a speech to the Cuban parliament last month, Raul Castro warned, "No one, neither an individual nor a country, has the luxury of indefinitely spending more than it receives from the sale of its products or the services that it renders."

He called for an end to "excessive subsidies" and voiced the need for "pressure" on the Cuban working class to increase productivity.

The average monthly wage amounts to \$20 and a dual-currency economy has opened up a social breach between those who--through work in the government or the tourist industry or from foreign remittances--have access to convertible pesos and those who don't. Among the former has emerged a layer with money while much of the latter is condemned to grinding poverty. Under these conditions, austerity measures carry the threat of social upheaval.

The Cuban economy has been kept afloat largely through cheap oil supplied by Venezuela as part of a barter arrangement in which Cuba has sent thousands of doctors and educators to

man Chavez's social assistance programs. The recent collapse in oil prices and growing pressure on the Venezuelan economy place the stability of this arrangement in doubt.

The effect of a disruption of this relationship, while not as disastrous as the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, would be severe. Venezuela accounted for more than half of the Cuban state's revenues in 2007.

Elsewhere, the Cuban government is attempting to forge broader economic ties with the European Union, China and Russia, effectively integrating the Cuban economy more directly into the world capitalist market. It has also been welcomed back into the fold of the Latin American bourgeois governments, having been admitted into the Group of Rio for the first time since the revolution.

The other potential change on the horizon is the rolling back of at least some of the economic sanctions imposed by Washington. President-elect Barack Obama pledged during the election campaign to repeal unpopular restrictions imposed by the Bush administration on visits and remittances by Cuban-Americans to their families on the island. The American Chamber of Commerce and other corporate lobbies are pressing for this first-ever ratcheting down of US sanctions against Cuba to be turned into a broader lifting of the embargo, so that American capital can once again exploit what it sees as a highly profitable market.

Such a normalization of economic relations with the US could ultimately present a far more dangerous threat to the survival of the Castro regime than the embargo itself.

In an earlier period, a generation of left nationalists in Latin America and petty-bourgeois radicals in the Europe and the United States hailed the nationalist revolution led by Fidel Castro, falsely presented his regime as a workers' state, and promoted Castroism as the new road to revolution and socialism everywhere.

The most pernicious tendency in this pro-Castro chorus was the Pabloite revisionist tendency within the Fourth International that seized upon the Cuban revolution as an argument for liquidating the Trotskyist movement and renouncing its essential historical tasks.

This revisionist trend argued that Castro's victory signified that the socialist revolution no longer required the active and leading intervention of a working class, made conscious of its historic tasks. Rather a "short-cut" had emerged, in which socialism could be achieved by small bands of armed men conducting guerrilla warfare and creating a new state, with the working class and the rest of the oppressed masses reduced to little more than passive bystanders.

The impact of these political conceptions proved catastrophic in the rest of Latin America. The promotion of guerrillaism served to separate the most revolutionary sections of the younger generation from the working class as a whole and pave the way to historic defeats and the rise of savage military dictatorships throughout most of the continent.

The rise of Castro and the series of nationalizations and the education and healthcare reforms that were the product of the revolution did not make Cuba a socialist state. It was not a state created by the working class taking power, but rather a state imposed from above by Castro's 26th of July movement in alliance with the Stalinist Communist Party. It has never allowed independent organs of workers' power and has ruthlessly repressed any challenge to the political domination of the Castro brothers.

Castroism represented not socialism, but rather one of the more radical variants of the bourgeois nationalist movements that swept to power throughout much of Africa, Asia and the Middle East during the rise of the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. In the end, it has proven just as incapable as its counterparts elsewhere of forging a path genuinely independent from imperialism.

This is the overriding significance of the remarks made by Raul Castro. The 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution coincides with the unfolding of the most far-reaching crisis of world capitalism in 70 years, bringing with it the prospect of a renewal of the international class struggle and of the fight for socialism throughout Latin America and on a world scale.

Yet the sclerotic Cuban regime sees these developments as a mortal threat with the potential of upending its fragile economy and disrupting its attempts to cement ties with the Latin American, European and ultimately the US capitalist ruling classes.

But Cuban workers and the younger generation will not be immune to the global political radicalization that is being unleashed by the economic crisis. Together with workers in the rest of Latin America, the success of their struggles requires an assimilation of the bitter lessons of the half-century experience with Castroism, and the building of a new independent revolutionary movement of the working class based on the program of socialist internationalism.

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The author also recommends:

Castroism and the politics of petty-bourgeois nationalism



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