

US-Cuban rapprochement: The lessons of history

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The simultaneous announcements Wednesday by Barack Obama and Raul Castro of moves to “normalize” US-Cuban relations have been hailed as a turning point by Latin America’s governments and major American corporations alike.

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff proclaimed the measures taken to reopen US-Cuban diplomatic relations and facilitate greater penetration of the island by US capital as a “change in civilization.” Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, whose government has just been hit with a new round of US sanctions, declared, “We have to recognize the gesture by President Barack Obama, a brave gesture, a historically necessary gesture.”

Meanwhile, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Thursday, “US companies from General Motors Co. to agribusiness giant Cargill Inc. to furniture retailer Ethan Allen Interiors Inc. applauded the White House announcement on Wednesday of its move to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba and begin dismantling the embargo in place for 54 years.”

Latin America’s bourgeois leaders hold out the hope that the measures agreed to by Havana and Washington will usher in a new period of harmony with US imperialism, while the US-based transnationals are salivating at the prospect of reaping super-profits off of low-wage Cuban labor provided and policed by the government in Havana.

No doubt the demands of the Chamber of Commerce and the American Manufacturers Association for access to the Cuba market played a major role in Obama’s decision. So too did the prospect that a massive influx of US dollars would do far more than the economic blockade to unravel what remains of the radical reforms instituted by the Cuban Revolution, while helping to bring to power a more pliant regime in Havana, restoring the kind of neocolonial relationship that prevailed before 1959.

For its part, the Castro regime sees the turn toward its longtime imperialist nemesis as a means of salvaging its rule and pursuing a path similar to that of China, preserving the privileges of the ruling strata through the development of capitalism and at the expense of the Cuban working class.

With all of the media euphoria about the historic character of the US-Cuban rapprochement, noticeably absent is any

consideration of what this shift discloses about the nature of the Cuban regime itself and the revolution that brought it to power. With the ushering in of a new “transformational era” for Cuba, as the *New York Times* put it in its gushing editorial Thursday, a balance sheet clearly is in order.

This is the most vital question for the world working class and its revolutionary leadership. The working class, particularly in Latin America, paid a heavy price for confusion over the nature of Castroism, much of it fomented by Pabloism, a revisionist tendency that emerged within the Fourth International.

This Pabloite tendency joined with left nationalists in Latin America and other petty-bourgeois radicals in Europe and elsewhere in proclaiming that the coming to power of Fidel Castro at the head of a nationalist guerrilla movement had opened up a new path to socialism, one that did not require the building of revolutionary Marxist parties, not to mention the conscious and independent intervention of the working class.

According to the Pabloite organizations, whose principal theoreticians were Ernest Mandel in Europe and Joseph Hansen (the leader of the Socialist Workers Party) in the United States, the nationalization of property in Cuba was all that was required to proclaim that a “workers’ state” had been established under Castro’s leadership. When the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) criticized this simplistic and utterly non-Marxist appraisal of the regime in Havana, it was cynically and duplicitously denounced as an enemy of the Cuban Revolution.

The International Committee warned that the political implications of the Pabloite glorification of Castroism extended far beyond Cuba. It represented a thoroughgoing break with the entire historical and theoretical conception of the socialist revolution going back to Marx.

Thrown overboard was the fundamental thesis adopted by the First International under Marx that “The liberation of the workers shall be the task of the workers themselves.” The revisionist trend claimed that, on the contrary, Castro’s coming to power proved that the socialist revolution could be achieved by means of “blunted instruments”—that is, without a Marxist revolutionary party and without the active and conscious participation of the working class at all. Armed bands of

peasant-based nationalist guerrillas would suffice, with their leaders emerging in the process as “natural Marxists.” The workers and the oppressed masses were relegated to the role of passive bystanders.

Long before the Cuban Revolution, Trotsky had explicitly rejected the facile identification of nationalizations undertaken by petty-bourgeois forces with the socialist revolution. In response to the expropriations carried out by the Kremlin regime in the course of its invasion of Poland (in alliance with Hitler) in 1939, Trotsky wrote: “The primary political criterion for us is not the transformation of property in this or another area, however important these may be in themselves, but rather the change in the consciousness and organization of the world proletariat, the raising of their capacity for defending former conquests and accomplishing new ones.”

The essence of the Pabloite position, the International Committee warned, was 1) the rejection of the central and leading role of the working class in the socialist revolution; and 2) the denial of the necessity for the building of a Trotskyist party to develop within the working class the consciousness required for the conquest of political power. Moreover, if such a party was not necessary in Cuba, as the Pabloites claimed, why would it be necessary anywhere else in the world?

The warnings of the International Committee were fully vindicated. Castroism was proclaimed the new model for socialist revolution. This perspective was to have catastrophic consequences in Latin America, where the Pabloites promoted guerrillas. They instructed their own followers in the region to abandon the fight for revolutionary leadership in the working class and instead throw themselves into “technical preparations” for “armed struggle” in the countryside.

The tragic results were threefold. The most radicalized sections of youth as well as younger workers were diverted from the fight for revolutionary leadership in the working class, helping to solidify the counterrevolutionary grip of the Stalinist, Social Democratic and bourgeois nationalist bureaucracies. These youth themselves were thrown into unequal and suicidal combat with the military forces of Latin American capitalist states, leading to the deaths of thousands. And the failed guerrilla adventures were invoked by the military in one country after another as the pretext for the imposition of fascist-military dictatorships and the wholesale repression of the working masses.

Among the victims of this perspective was Castro’s closest comrade-in-arms, Che Guevara. Disillusioned by the rapid bureaucratization of the Cuban regime, he embarked on his fatal adventure in Bolivia. Ignoring the revolutionary potential of the powerful Bolivian working class, Guevara sought to create a guerrilla army among the most backward and oppressed sections of the peasantry. Isolated and starving, Guevara was hunted down by the Bolivian military and executed in October 1967. Guevara’s fate was a tragic anticipation of the disastrous consequences of Castroism and

Pabloite revisionism.

The net result was the defeat of a powerful revolutionary upsurge throughout Latin America, which in turn played a vital role in enabling imperialism to survive a period of intense revolutionary crises and class struggles that prevailed internationally from 1968 to 1975.

The ICFI fought implacably against this entire perspective. Castroism, it insisted, represented not some new road to socialism, but rather one of the most radical variants of bourgeois nationalism, which came to power in many of the former colonial countries in the 1960s. Many of these regimes carried out wide-ranging nationalizations.

Castro’s policies failed to resolve the fundamental historic problems of Cuban society—backwardness and dependence—which were only papered over by Soviet subsidies and subsequently infusions of cheap oil from Venezuela.

Basing itself on Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, the International Committee insisted that the struggle for liberation from imperialist oppression in the colonial and former colonial countries could be won only under the leadership of the working class, its conquest of power and the extension of the revolution internationally. The principal task flowing from this perspective is that of building independent revolutionary parties of the working class in a relentless struggle to break the grip of all those tendencies seeking to subordinate the workers to bourgeois nationalism.

Fifty-five years after the Cuban Revolution, the trajectory of the Castro regime has thoroughly vindicated the perspective fought for by the ICFI, which remains every bit as vital today in Cuba, Latin America as a whole and internationally.

The rapprochement between Washington and Havana will only serve to accelerate the already rapid growth of social inequality, poverty and class tensions on the island, as well as the series of counter-reforms that are steadily eroding what remains of the gains of the revolution.

Cuban workers, like their counterparts in Latin America and internationally, will be thrust inevitably onto the road of revolutionary struggle. The vital preparation for these struggles is assimilating the bitter lessons of the protracted experience with Castroism and petty-bourgeois nationalism and the building of new independent revolutionary parties of the working class, sections of the world Trotskyist movement, the ICFI.



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