

Obama to make March trip to Cuba

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President Barack Obama will make a state visit to Cuba on March 21-22, the first such trip to the island by a sitting American president since Calvin Coolidge sailed aboard a US warship there for a 1928 meeting of the Conference of American States.

The White House announcement of the visit left little doubt that the purpose of Obama's trip is to further the restoration of the semi-colonial domination that US imperialism exercised over Cuba in Coolidge's day, when the Platt Amendment guaranteed Washington the "right" to intervene in Cuban affairs as it saw fit and allowed it to seize Guantanamo Bay for its military base.

Obama, the statement says, intends to "build on the progress we have made toward normalization of relations with Cuba," which, following protracted secret negotiations, was consummated in a deal announced by the US president and his Cuban counterpart, Raul Castro, in December 2014 to restore diplomatic relations.

The visit, the statement continues, will be directed at "advancing commercial and people-to-people ties." In addition to a formal meeting with Raul Castro, Obama intends to meet with "members of civil society" and "entrepreneurs."

A key component of the Obama visit, the statement indicated, will be propagandizing on the subject of "human rights," the filthy banner under which US imperialism has prosecuted unending wars and covert interventions from the Middle East to the former Soviet Union. At the same time, the official pretense of the administration is that everything that it is doing is designed to "improve the lives of the Cuban people."

At a press conference in Havana confirming the visit, the Foreign Relations Ministry official in charge of US issues, Josefina Vidal, stated that the Castro government is "open to discussing any issue with the government of the United States, including human

rights."

Vidal added that the full "normalization of bilateral relations" required the lifting of the economic blockade that the US has imposed on Cuba since 1960 and the return of the Guantanamo Naval Base, where Washington has for more than 14 years maintained its illegal detention and torture camp. The Obama administration does not have the ability to meet the first demand and has no intention of meeting the second.

Despite the mounting pressure from US financial, industrial and agricultural interests desperate to begin reaping profits off the relatively untapped Cuban market, the Republican leadership in Congress, which would have to vote to lift the embargo, remains staunchly opposed to ending it, even as the Obama administration uses executive power to ameliorate some of its conditions.

On Tuesday, the US and Cuba reached an agreement to restore direct commercial air flights between the two countries for the first time in 50 years, with virtually ever major US carrier bidding for the 110 daily flights that are being allowed by the US Department of Transportation.

The Obama administration has also given its approval for the opening of the first US-owned factory in Cuba in the more than 50 years since the government of Fidel Castro nationalized American properties and turned to the Soviet Union for aid following Washington's attempt to veto even the most minimal reforms following the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship.

The assembly plant is supposed to manufacture up to 1,000 light and inexpensive tractors a year in a "special economic zone" created by the Cuban government at the port of Mariel. The owners of the factory expect to initially hire 30 Cuban workers and to employ up to 300. The Cuban government is to act as a labor contractor, supplying workers for exploitation in return for a cut of the profits.

In what may ultimately prove a more lucrative enterprise, the US heavy equipment manufacturer Caterpillar has chosen a Puerto Rican company to serve as its distributor in Cuba in preparation for the lifting of economic restrictions that prevent it from entering the Cuban market. The US corporate giant has been among the most vocal lobbyists for the lifting of the economic embargo.

Earlier this week, US Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker hosted a “US-Cuba Regulatory Dialogue” with the participation of Cuba’s Minister of Foreign Trade and Investment Rodrigo Malmierca in Washington, stating the mission of the meeting was “to provide US companies with more opportunity to do business in Cuba, including with state-owned enterprises.” She reported that in 2015 alone, the Commerce Department had approved 490 authorizations for such deals, together worth \$4.3 billion.

In a separate set of negotiations, the State Department is in talks with the Cuban government aimed at resolving claims by US corporations and citizens for compensation for enterprises that were expropriated in the wake of the 1959 Cuban revolution. Reportedly, some of these claims may be settled by offering US companies favorable conditions for exploiting the Cuban market.

The Obama visit takes place in the context of an accelerating drive by American capitalism’s European and Asian rivals to consolidate and build upon the advantages they have accrued by entering the Cuban market as Washington sought to isolate and strangle the island’s economy.

Cuban President Raul Castro made a state visit to France at the beginning of this month to sign a series of deals following France’s leading role in negotiating debt forgiveness for Cuba at the end of last year. Half of what remains owed to France is to be poured into a 220 million euro fund to invest in Franco-Cuban projects.

“We want to accompany Cuba on the path it has chosen to open up and develop,” French President François Hollande said during the visit. “Opening up begins with trade.”

Spain, meanwhile, has concluded a similar debt forgiveness deal in return for wider access to the Cuban market.

This imperialist scramble for Cuba contributed to a 4

percent growth of the Cuban economy last year, much of it due to a record inflow of tourists. Economic growth, however, has gone hand-in-hand with increasing social inequality between average Cuban workers and a thin but growing layer of “entrepreneurs” and government officials.

The ruling stratum in Havana is banking on a rapprochement with US imperialism and a steady expansion of capitalist economic relations, along with the maintenance of their current political monopoly, preserving their interests along a path similar to that taken by the Chinese Communist Party.

The rapidity of the current changes combined with rising social polarization, however, must, sooner rather than later, yield social eruptions.



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